

Chillin' in Another World

WITH **LV 2**

SUPER CHEAT POWERS



4



Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri



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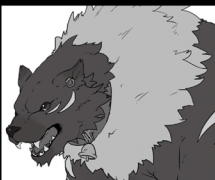
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Characters

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2
Super Cheat Powers

 Flio Former Hero Candidate and General Store Proprietor.	 Rys Flio's wife, a lupine demon.	 Wyne (Human Form) Freeloader with high stats and a big appetite.
 Elinàsze Flio and Rys's daughter.	 Garyl Flio and Rys's son.	 Wyne (Wyvern Form) Wyne in her Wyvern form. Her destructive power is top-class among demons.
 Hiya The djinn who commands the Origin of Light and Darkness.	 Damalynas The Grand Magus of Midnight. In training in Hiya's mindscape.	 Belano A former witch of Klyrode. A quiet, shy, and skittish teacher.
 Sybe (Psychobear Form) Flio's pet.	 Sybe (Unicorn Rabbit Form) How Sybe looks most of the time.	 Blossom A former sword fighter of Klyrode. Works hard on the farm.

Super Cheat Powers

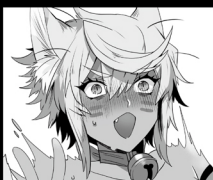
Characters

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2
Super Cheat Powers



Ghozal

Once known as the mightiest
Dark One in history.



Uliminas

Served as the Dark One
Ghozi's confederate.



Balirossa

Former knight of Klyrode. Currently
falling in love with Ghozal.



Hero Gold-Hair

On the run from the law
despite being the "hero."



Tsuya

Hero Gold-Hair's
partner in crime.



Valentine

A beguiling dijan and one of
the Twelve Evil Generals.



Byleri

A former archer of Klyrode.
A consummate horse girl.



Sleip (Human Form)

Former member of the
Infernal Four.



Sleip (Lichsteed Form)

Living with his lover Byleri,
who saved his life.



Yuigarde

Ghozal's younger brother and
short-tempered Dark One.



Phufun

Yuigarde's minion, a succubus,
and an extreme masochist.



Greanyl

Shadow demon working for
the Fli-o-Rys General Store.



The Maiden Queen

Hardworking queen with a
strong sense of justice.

Super Cheat Powers

Chapter 1: At Long Last!

The world of Klyrode is a land of swords and sorcery, full of all sorts of magic beasts and demihumans, where humans and demons have been at war for many, many long years.

The devil Zanzibar had had enough of the brutality of the current ruler of demonkind—Yuigarde the Dark One—and raised up the flag of rebellion, vying for the throne. With their armies split in two by Yuigarde and Zanzibar's feud, the demons had nothing to spare for launching attacks against humanity.

The Maiden Queen who ruled the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, the greatest human kingdom, did not let this opportunity go to waste. She ordered reinforcements to the front, strengthening her army's position. She set meticulous plans into motion, not neglecting in the slightest the domestic affairs of her country. For the near future, the whole of the Magical Kingdom would be phenomenally busy with the war efforts.

And so the stage is set for our story. The curtains slowly rise...

◇Houghtow City—The Fli-o'-Rys General Store◇

The city of Houghtow lay to the west of Castle Klyrode. It was a good distance from the front lines of the war and had almost never come under attack by the Dark Army. The people of Houghtow had barely felt the effects of the war at all.

In one of the shopping districts in the city, there stood a very particular shop—"The Fli-o'-Rys General Store" read the wooden sign that decorated its doorway. They had opened up in the empty building of a store that had gone out of business, but if the location had been bad for the previous occupants, it did not stop the Fli-o'-Rys General Store from drawing in hordes of customers day after day after day. Nor did the small size of the cart-staging area behind the shop prevent a hugely disproportionate number of carts and wagons from busily coming and going, delivering the shop's goods to all the corners of the kingdom.

The front door opened. A bell rang. "Good afternoon!" said the man who was busy stocking the shelves. "Welcome to the Fli-o'-Rys General Store!" He smiled amiably at the adventurer who had entered the shop.

The adventurer looked around, and then approached the man who

had greeted him. "Excuse me," he said. "I'm an adventurer. My name is Sireul." He paused. "I heard that the manager of this shop was some kind of master at equipment repair."

The man Sireul had addressed gave him an easygoing smile with just a hint of a smirk. "I don't know if I'd go as far as to say *master*," he said, "but I'm probably the guy you're looking for."

"Oh! You are?"

"I am! My name is Flio. I run this store."

"You?" Sireul cocked his head in confusion. *Huh?* he thought. *But Wreek told me that this man had some kind of incredible ability that let him repair broken equipment in the blink of an eye! This Flio just looks like your average young shop owner.*

Flio saw the confusion in Sireul's eyes and smiled again. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Huh?" Sireul was startled out of his thoughts. "O-Oh! No, it's nothing..." *Well*, he thought, *I did come all this way...* Sireul took the rucksack he was wearing off his back and procured a sword from it. "It's kind of a mess," he said apologetically.

Flio gasped when he saw the sword. It was thick, but there were dents and chips all the way down the blade, and a frightening number of thin cracks running through the body. It looked like it could fall apart at any moment.

"The truth is," Sireul said, "I was hunting monsters in the forest, and I ended up smashing a shield boar with this thing as hard as I could." Shield boars were omnivorous magic beasts known to ruin farms and fields, and to occasionally attack humans or smaller monsters. The hide on their back was extremely tough, and the usual method for fighting one was to aim for the face. However, Sireul was by no means the first adventurer to mistake a shield boar for a similar beast—like a tusk boar or a charge boar—and ruin their weapon by striking the boar's back. He would hardly be the last.

"Oh, a shield boar, is it?" Flio asked. "I understand completely. I've seen this a lot—customers who attacked a shield boar by mistake and ruined their weapon. Anyway, here you go." Flio handed the sword back to Sireul. He had only held it for the time it took to say those three sentences.

"Huh?" Sireul blinked in disbelief. Flio had barely touched the sword, and he had been chattering away the entire time! *Oh*, he thought. *I guess he couldn't repair it after all...* He sighed deeply as he accepted the sword.

"Wait..." Sireul took another look, and his eyes went wide. The damage was gone. His sword looked like it had the day it was forged. "Huh? What?!" Confused, he did a triple take. He touched it with his hand to be sure that it was real. There was no mistake; his sword had

been restored to perfect condition.

“How’s that?” Flio asked, still giving his carefree smile. “Does it feel right?”

“I... You...” Sireul started. “It’s...completely repaired! Incredible...”

“If there’s anything else, feel free to ask,” Flio said. “I’ll help as much as I can.”

“R-Really?!” Sireul responded, a little louder than he had intended. “W-Well then! Actually, could you make the grip a little thicker? I think I might be able to handle it a little better that way.”

“The grip? Let’s see...” Flio touched just his index finger to the grip of Sireul’s sword. “How do you like that?”

“Huh? H-Huh?!” Sireul’s eyes went even wider. All Flio had done was run his finger along it, but the grip had undeniably changed. “Wow!” he exclaimed. “Amazing! It really is thicker!” He gripped the sword in both hands, a look of utter disbelief on his face.

“Was there anything else you needed?” Flio asked, his smile as easygoing and carefree as ever.



“Wreck really recommended a good store. Fli-o’-Rys... I’ll have to remember that.” Sireul nodded in satisfaction as he left.

Flio saw him off with a smile. “Thank you!” he said. “Come back any time!”

When Sireul was gone, Ghozal walked up to Flio, a smile on his face. “Hrm,” he said. “Incredible as ever, Mister Flio. You repaired the sword—upgraded it, even—and all without letting on that you’re just using magic.”

Ghozal had once been the Dark One, but now his younger brother claimed that title while he worked at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store disguised as a human. He was freeloading at Flio’s house at present. You might call the two of them best friends.

Flio laughed. “I thought you might be able to tell, Ghozal.” He smirked.

“Nah,” Ghozal said. “I only noticed because I was watching carefully. Otherwise, I would have had no idea.” He clapped a hand on Flio’s shoulder. “But Mister Flio, with that little trick of yours, you could probably turn that sword into a masterpiece.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Flio said. “That might be a little hard.” He retrieved one of the swords from a nearby basket—a cheap one, not one of the expensive ones mounted for display on the walls of the shop. They stocked items like this to sell to run-of-the-mill adventurers. Flio held his hand over the blade of the sword and began channeling his magic. “I think this is about the best I can do.”

“Excuse me,” said Greanyl, walking up from the side. She took a

knee. "I apologize for interrupting. Lord Flio, do you have a moment?" Greanyl was both a shadow demon and a member of the Silent Listeners, the former intelligence apparatus of the Dark Army. When Ghozal had abdicated his position as Dark One, they had followed him and quit the Dark Army. Now the Silent Listeners worked at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store under the guise of demihumans. Perhaps self-conscious about butting in on their conversation, Greanyl sidled up closer, still on one knee.

Flio looked over at Greanyl and stopped working on the sword for the time being. "First thing, Greanyl, would you mind standing up? I've told you there's no need to go that far, haven't I?"

"But... But..." she protested.

"Seriously!" Flio said. "Don't worry about it!" He took Greanyl by her arm and pulled her to her feet. The shadow demon looked between Flio and Ghozal with a hapless look on her face. During her time in the Dark Army, it was customary to kneel when before one's superiors.

"Greanyl," Ghozal said, smiling, "Mister Flio is telling you he doesn't mind. Let it go."

"See?" Flio said. "Even Mister Ghozal agrees."

"But... Even if my lords were to say so, I...I feel that this is disrespectful." She bowed, looking terribly apologetic, but at least she was finally standing.

"So, what did you need?" Flio asked.

"Sir..." Greanyl said, a distraught expression on her face. "Our next shipment for Castle Klyrode is due to leave soon, but we still have yet to receive the lembon cakes."

"No lembon cakes?" Flio asked. "That's strange. I asked Rys to make them this morning..." After a bit of thought, he handed the sword to Ghozal and gave him another smile. "Sorry," he said, "it sounds like something's come up. But this is probably about the best I can do at my skill level." Then, he extended his hand, creating a magic circle from which appeared a large portal—it took the form of an ordinary-looking door. "I'm gonna go check on Rys. Would you wait just a moment, Greanyl?"

"I will accompany you, Lord Flio," said Greanyl, moving to follow after him. "I will recover the cakes and return here directly."

"All right, let's go then!" Flio said, opening the door. On the other side was Flio's living room.

Sybe, in its unicorn-rabbit form, ran up to them and snuffled curiously. Sybe was originally a wild psychobear. It had encountered Flio in the woods and immediately realized that it was no match for him. Sybe surrendered, and Flio took it into his household as a pet. Flio had used magic to give it a unicorn-rabbit form along with the

ability to switch forms freely. Usually, it preferred to spend its time as a unicorn-rabbit.

Flio scooped Sybe up into his arms and walked through the door. Greanyl followed after him. The portal disappeared behind them as it closed. There were not many people in the world who could use Teleportation magic so effortlessly with just their own power. To Flio, however, it wasn't such a big deal. In fact, he himself used Teleportation freely and casually in his daily life. As far as he knew, lots of people in this world could use magic on that level.

Back in the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, Ghozal was regarding the sword Flio had given him with wry amusement. "Hey, Uliminas," he said, calling out to the woman doing paperwork behind the register. "What do you think of this sword?"

When Ghozal had been the Dark One, Uliminas the hellcat served as his confederate. She had left with her master along with the Silent Listeners, and now also worked at Fli-o'-Rys disguised as a demihuman. Like Ghozal, she was living at Flio's house. "Mew?" she asked. "Meowt do I think of that cheap sword?"

"Here," said Ghozal, "hold it."

Uliminas took the sword from him and her tail stood up on end, quivering. Her eyes shot open. "I-I thought this was a discount weapon!" she said. "But there's some wild meowgic in here. I would've never realized from meow it looks..."

"Lady Uliminas," said Hiya, appearing rather suddenly, "I do not believe that sword is imbued with any enchantments worthy of note." Hiya was known as the djinn who commanded the origin of light and darkness, the wielder of magics strong enough to bring the world to ruin. When Flio defeated them, they resolved to become his servant and took to calling him by the name "Exalted One." Right now, Hiya was helping create magic items to sell in the shop.

Hiya held their hand to the sword, calling up a window. The text in the window listed out an *extraordinary* number of enchantments. There were too many to fit in a single window, and soon a second opened, and then a third. Hiya read the windows, their eyes not opening any further than their usual slits.

"Attack power up..." they read. "Attack speed up... And it's enchanted with damaging magics—fire, water, and earth elementals. It seems that it is designed to automatically discern which of those three would be most efficacious against its wielder's opponent. That alone would make it a formidable weapon, but I also see recovery spells, enhancement spells, support spells. All told..." They pondered for a moment. "Ah, I fear it would take me some time to count them. There are so many."

Hiya glanced over at the windows which were still multiplying, their expression unchanged. "This must be the doing of the Exalted One," they said. "A reminder, I suppose, of how far he is beyond me." They bowed deeply.

"It looks like it changes its form to suit its wielder too," said Ghozal, who had taken the sword back from Uliminas and was now holding it aloft above his head. "Hrm... Any kingdom would happily make this a national treasure." He smirked. "We should probably tell Mister Flio that he shouldn't go around handing out swords like this on a moment's impulse."

"I believe that would be best." Hiya nodded. "The Exalted One thinks too little of his own power."

Uliminas looked up at the sword in Ghozal's hand. "That guy..." she said. "Making ameowzing swords like it's meowthing... If he felt like it, I bet he could conquer the world."

Ghozal laughed. "Mister Flio would never do that!"

"That is my estimation as well." Hiya nodded.

"What Mister Flio wants," Ghozal continued, "is to make a world where everyone can live together in peace. He beat Mx. Hiya, and he's even stronger than me, the strongest Dark One in history. But he wants to use his power to work for a peaceful future. He's a strange one, isn't he?"

Uliminas nodded. "Meow that mew mention it," she said, "he is *quite* purrculiar."

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

"Rys?" Holding Sybe in his arms, Flio poked his head into the kitchen. Inside, he could see Rys, wearing an apron, packing a fresh-baked lembon cake into a box.

"Oh!" she said. "M-My lord husband!"

Rys had once been a soldier in the Dark Army—a fearsome lupine demon. Flio had defeated her, and she had chosen to follow him as his wife. Now she lived as a demihuman, cooking for everyone in Flio's household and helping out with the shop.

"Are those the lembon cakes for today's delivery?" asked Flio.

"Yes, that's right," Rys started, and then she noticed the shadow demon following after her husband. "Greanyl?!" Greanyl stepped past and put the box of lembon cakes into her Bottomless Bag. "I suppose I must have run late..." Rys said. "I'm terribly sorry. All the cakes are in that box."

"Thank you, Lady Rys," Greanyl said, bowing deeply.

Rys lowered her head. "I really am sorry to make you come and pick it up yourself. I know I had promised to bring them to you earlier."

“It’s perfectly all right,” Greanyl said. “The cakes will reach Castle Klyrode on time and without incident. In fact, I would say I owe *you* an apology for making you rush.” She bowed again, but inwardly she was shocked. *I-I can’t believe Lady Fenrys lowered her head to me!* she thought.

When she was in the Dark Army, Rys—formerly Fenrys—had been the right hand of her brother Fengaryl, the leader of the army’s fierce lupine division. She had been short-tempered and haughty—not the kind to bow her head to anyone. The gap between the Fenrys Greanyl had known well in her days as a spy and the Rys lowering herself to bow in apology was enough to make her doubt her senses. Greanyl turned to look at Flio. *It must be the influence of her husband, Lord Flio...* she thought, and suddenly jerked her head up.

“W-W-W-W-W-Well then, excuse me!” she stammered. “I must hurry if I’m to reach Castle Klyrode on time!” With her hasty goodbyes said, she ran for the door.

“Greanyl!” Flio called after her. “I can make a portal for you! It’s no problem!”

“There’s no need, Lord Flio!” Greanyl called out over her shoulder. “It isn’t much of a run from here, and I’d hate to bother you with this more than I already have.” She leapt out a window and took off down the road at a ridiculous speed.

Flio watched Greanyl go. “It really isn’t that big a deal,” he said, scratching the back of his head.

Rys walked up to him and bowed again, deeply. “Um,” she started. “I really am terribly sorry. You shouldn’t have had to trouble yourself with this, but I was delayed in finishing the cakes...”

“I keep telling you it isn’t any trouble,” Flio said. He placed a hand on Rys’s shoulder to comfort her.

“My lord husband...” Rys cooed, gazing up at him. “Thank you so much!”

Hm? Flio knit his eyebrows slightly as he looked at Rys’s face. “Rys, are you not feeling well? You look a little pale.”

“I do?” Flio’s words seemed to surprise her. After giving it a little thought, Rys said, “I-I’m sorry. The truth is, I haven’t been feeling quite well the past few days...” She gave her husband a forced smile, trying her very hardest not to make him worry. “Oh, but I’m sure I’ll feel better once I’ve slept...”

Flio placed his palm on Rys’s forehead. A magic circle appeared. “I’ll try healing you with magic,” he said. “Hold on...” The magic circle began to slowly rotate. Her hair floated up like it was blown by a gentle breeze as her body shone with golden light. It felt good. Rys closed her eyes and sighed deeply.

“What’s this?” said Flio, sensing that something was off.

“What’s wrong, my love?” asked Rys. She opened her eyes. She could tell from his voice that something was bothering him.

“Hmm...” Flio mused. “What does this mean...?” He slowly lowered his hand from where it was pressed against Rys’s forehead, down her body. He brought it past her head, past her throat, past her chest...and finally it came to rest at her belly.

“M-My lord husband?!” Rys asked, suddenly blushing bright red. She shook her head, pressing her hands against her flushing cheeks. “W-Wait! I don’t know when Blossom and Wyne are going to come back from the fields! I mean...I’m very happy, if that’s what you want to do, b-but Sybe is here, and m-maybe we’d best retire to our chambers to—”

“No, no,” said Flio. “That’s not it, Rys...” Rys had been leaping to conclusions. In fact, Flio was staring at her belly with a serious look on his face. He kept his hand there, staring fixedly at the area around her belly where she wore an apron over her usual white blouse.

Rys realized something was strange. Her husband wasn’t acting like himself. She looked up at him. “M-My lord husband?”

“Yeah,” said Flio. “There’s no doubt about it.” He looked back to Rys’s face. “Congratulations, Rys!” he said. “It looks like you’re pregnant!” Flio pulled Rys into his arms, a huge grin spreading over his face. But then he noticed that Rys was staring blankly at him, like she hadn’t understood what he said. “Huh?”

“I-I’m pregnant?” Rys said. “I-I’m going to have a baby?”

“Yes!” said Flio. “You are!”

“I-I’m gonna have m-my lord husband’s baby...” she marveled. “For real...?” Her shoulders were trembling as she gazed into Flio’s eyes.

Flio nodded. “That’s right. It’s our child.”

“Our child...” Rys hugged Flio tight, finally understanding the situation. “My lord husband!” she cheered. “I did it! I did it!”

Tears of joy were streaming down her face.

Sybe snuffled happily from where it was watching, a short distance away. Standing on its two hind legs, it clapped its paws in celebration as Flio and Rys grinned at each other with giddy jubilation, still in their loving embrace.



◇Flio's House—Evening◇

That evening, everyone gathered for dinner in the living room. When all the residents were accounted for, Flio stood up. "Everyone, before we eat, there's something we'd like to tell you." Rys stood up next to her husband, who put his arm around her shoulder. "We just found out that Rys is pregnant!" He smiled. Rys, blushing pink, had a huge grin on her face.

"L-Lady Rys!" Balirossa sprung up. "Y-You're—"

"You're having Flio's..." Blossom continued, rising as well.

"Like, you're having his baby?!" Byleri jumped up and crossed her arms in front of her chest.

"C-Congratulations!" said Belano in a high-pitched voice as she joined the toast.

Balirossa, Blossom, Byleri, and Belano had once been knights serving Castle Klyrode. Balirossa was their leader, Blossom was a heavy fighter, Byleri was an archer, and Belano was a witch. They had quit their order to live at Flio's house, and now they too were working at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. Blossom, who was close friends with Balirossa, also worked the farm outside Flio's house—while Byleri, who excelled at taking care of horses, had a side business rearing horses and lending them out. Belano, meanwhile, had been scouted by the Houghtow College of Magic, where she now worked as a defensive magic instructor.

"Whoa!" shouted Wyne, who had been sitting next to Rys. She had shot up at the same time as Balirossa's party. "Mama's got a baby in her belly?" She skipped and hopped joyful circles around Rys. Wyne was a dragonewt, a people said to make the finest soldiers among all dragonkind. Flio and Rys had found her when she had collapsed from hunger and saved her life. Now, she too lived at Flio's house. She was still growing, and had an outlandish appetite.

"That's right, Wyne," said Rys, beaming happily. "My lord husband's baby is in my belly right now."

Rys's words seemed to make Wyne's spirits sail even higher. "Wow!" she cheered. "A baby! A baby! Dada and mama are having a baby!"

Ghozal began to applaud, a big grin spread wide on his face. "Well! Congratulations! With how you two were getting on, it was only a matter of time, but...hrm. I would say congratulations are in order!"

Next to Ghozal, Uliminas began to applaud as well. "Aha ha!" she laughed. "I still can't believe Fenrys, our bloodcurdling beast of a demeown, had such a mewternal instinct! I'm sure everyone mew

knew from back then would be shocked to see mew now!" For all her ribbing, Uliminas also had a jovial smile on her face. Uliminas and Rys had been friends in the Dark Army. In her case, it wasn't just the happiness of the occasion that made her grin with joy.

Rys smiled back at her old friend. "Uliminas," she said, "would you kindly refrain from discussing my past? I am but the wife of my lord husband now." As she spoke, the fingertips of her right hand transformed into a wolf's claws.

"W-Wait! Hold on!" said Uliminas. "I was just teasing mew! It was a joke!"

"Oh," Rys said, chuckling. "I'm only joking too." Playfully, she turned her claws back into human fingers. The two looked at each other, and then burst out laughing.

While Rys and Uliminas kept each other company, Hiya approached Flio from the other side. They knelt with practiced grace and slowly lowered their head. "Exalted One, My Lady... I wish both of you joy on this auspicious occasion. I, your humble servant, here renew my vow to serve you—and your unborn child—with the whole of my being."

"Hiya," said Flio, "I appreciate it, really..." He placed a hand on their shoulder, indicating for them to stand. "But regardless of anything that happened in the past, I consider your present self to be one of my dearest friends. There really is no need for such a formal—"

"Oh!" Hiya exclaimed, an expression of rapture on their face. "For you to spare such words for a wretch such as I! I am deeply grateful." Flio smiled and patted Hiya on the shoulder.

"But you know," said Ghozal, "it's going to be a lot of hard work."

"I know," Rys answered. "I haven't forgotten." Grinning, she picked up a book she had set down by her chair. "Look! I bought this book about childbirth and caring for infants from Miyan Walkey in Sojieya. I've read it cover to cover!" On the book's cover was the title *Childbirth and Childcare*.

"Oh!" said Balirossa. "Excellent, Lady Rys!"

"She thinks of everything, doesn't she?" said Blossom.

"Right?" said Byleri. "She's, like, the best?"

Belano said nothing. She just nodded. The four applauded harder than they had been already, impressed by Rys's diligence.

"According to this book," Rys went on, "it will take a little less than ten months for the child to be born. We'll have to get everything ready by that time..." She started flipping through the book with an air of smugness.

But Ghozal heaved a heavy sigh. "Hold on, Rys," he said. "What did you just say?"

"What do you mean?" Rys innocently asked.

Ghozal walked up next to her, and pointed to a particular spot on the book's cover. "I think you might have missed this," he said.

"This part, right here?" Rys, as well as Flio and Hiya, looked where Ghozal was pointing. Everyone else crowded around behind them, trying to see.

Where Ghozal had pointed, written in small letters, was the rest of the title: *Human Edition*.

"*Human...Edition?*" Rys's eyes went wide.

"Hrm," said Ghozal. "Aren't you a lupine demon? This book isn't gonna be accurate."

"Y-You're kidding!" Rys was stunned. "B-B-But...the shopkeeper told me that this was their best-selling book!" Rys stared at the book like she was trying to burn a hole through the pages. "Oh..." she said, starting to sweat, "but I suppose he never did ask my species..."



“Hrm...” said Ghozal. “Well, if you need to know about demons, you have the former Dark One right here. I happen to know that lupine pregnancies are much shorter than that.”

“O-Oh?” Rys asked. “Th-They are?”

Ghozal sighed. “You’re a lupine demon yourself,” he said. “How do you not know this?”

“But!” Rys protested, her voice a squeaky falsetto. “B-B-But...my parents and my brother never taught me anything but how to fight and how to lead an army!”

Ghozal grimaced involuntarily. “Lupines, honestly.” He sighed. “Listen, Rys, lupine pregnancies take about a month.”

“A... A month?” Rys’s eyes went impossibly wider. She was so stunned that her tail appeared and her wolf ears popped up. Flio, Balirossa, Blossom, Byleri, and Belano looked no less shocked.

“Yaaay!” Wyne cheered. “I’ll get to meet the baby in a month!” She and Sybe started dancing together joyfully.

Uliminas, who had been watching this whole mess, made a tight-lipped smile and scratched her head. “Rys,” she said, “I have a book about demeown purregnancies. Mew can borrow it if mew want.”

“Really?!” Rys’s eyes lit up as she darted over to Uliminas. “Uliminas, really? Really really?!”

“Yeah, really,” said Uliminas.

“Oh, thank you!” Rys said, sighing with relief. “I’ll be able to learn what I need to after all.”

“Well,” said Ghozal, “even with that book, it’ll be a lot of hard work. I’ll help in any way I can, so feel free to ask if you need anything!” Ghozal laughed and thumped his chest.

“Thank you, Mister Ghozal,” said Flio, bowing graciously. “You’re a big help.”

“I wouldn’t rely too much on him if I were mew,” said Uliminas, a sardonic grin on her face. “Did mew know he once mewxed up pandamen and dogbears? He was giving aaall kinds of weird instructions...”

“H-Hrm?” Ghozal looked confused. “Did I?”

“Mew did!” Uliminas was indignant. “It was a mewge mess! Don’t tell me mew just went and furrrot about it!”

At once, the living room erupted with laughter.

While everyone was carrying on, laughing and shouting, Balirossa sighed. “A baby, huh?” she muttered softly to herself. Her eyes unconsciously drifted over to Ghozal. A second later, she realized that she had started to stare and quickly shook her head. *No, no, no, no, no!* she thought. *Why would thinking about babies make me look at Ghozal?!*

H-He may have saved my life, and it's true that he's always kind to me when we work together, and I suppose he does call me beautiful very often, but... The more she thought, the redder her face became. But th-that doesn't mean I'm...in love with him or anything!

Balirossa covered her face with her hands.

“By the way, Uliminas,” Rys said, ignorant of Balirossa’s little meltdown.

“Meowt is it, Rys?”

“Well,” Rys started, “I’m very glad you agreed to lend me your book on demon pregnancies, but I was wondering. You aren’t married, right? Why do you have something like that?”

“Meow?!” Rys’s words had an unexpectedly powerful effect on the hellcat. For the second time that day, her tail stood up straight in shock. “N-N-No!” she said. “I-I-I didn’t get it for myself! I... I... Oh, mew know, back when I was Ghozal’s confederate in the Dark Army, I had to deal with those sorts of things with my mewinions sometimes, so...” she trailed off. This was a lie, of course. When she was in the Dark Army, Ghozal would often take her to bed. She had acquired the book to study *just in case* she ended up pregnant with Ghozal’s child.

“Really?” asked Rys. “I don’t remember you speaking to people about their families...”

“W-W-W-Well!” Uliminas stammered incoherently. “M-Mew know! Mew were away fighting most of the time!”

Ghozal never thought of me as meownly his subordinate, Uliminas thought, her heart a whirlpool of complicated emotions. And...that one time, he kissed me! He said he loved me too...

◇The Following Morning, on Blossom’s Farm◇

The morning after Rys learned she was pregnant, Blossom got up early to work the fields like she always did. Sybe, in its psychobear form, followed after her, pulling a cart to fill with freshly harvested vegetables.

She shared the good news with her assistants. One of them, the goblin named Hokh’hokton, cried out with joy. “Jubilation!” he said. “Lord Flio and Lady Rys are to have a child?”

Blossom grinned. “Yeah, that’s right! Sounds like they’ll be born in about a month. Isn’t that right, Sybe?” She hit the psychobear playfully on its chest.

“Gwowl!” said Sybe, nodding happily.

Hokh’hokton folded his arms and nodded. “I see, I see!” he said. “What glad tidings! Don’t you think so, Maunty?”

“Yeah,” said his fellow goblin Maunty. “I think it’s great!” He nodded, smiling happily. “Children are cute no matter how many you

have!" He looked behind him where his wife and children were hard at work harvesting vegetables.

Hokh'hokton and Maunty had once been soldiers in the Dark Army, but Blossom and Flio had given them food when they were hungry. They had a debt of gratitude to the two, and resolved to work for Blossom from then on, helping her with her farm. Maunty, who was a married goblin, had brought his family here from their former home in Dark Army territory, but...

"You may say that, Maunty," said Hokh'hokton, smirking as he looked out at the field where Maunty's children were busy harvesting, "but surely *fifteen children* is a terrible handful, is it not?"

"Huh?" Blossom was looking at the same field Maunty was, smiling. But suddenly, a doubtful expression crossed her face. She started to count, ticking them off on her fingers. "One, two, three..." she started, and went on until, "thirteen, fourteen, fifteen...*sixteen*?" She had counted one more than Hokh'hokton's number. She froze in shock. "M-Maunty," she said. "What's going on here?"

Hokh'hokton, who had been counting along with Blossom, opened his eyes wide.

"Ah, well, you know..." said Maunty, laughing jovially. "We had another kid, three days ago."

"What?!" exclaimed Blossom and Maunty.

"Gwowr?!" cried Sybe. All three were stunned.

For a while, the only sound was Maunty's laughter.

◇Meanwhile, in Hiya's Mindscape◇

Hiya, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, stood in the mindscape of their mental world: a pure white space expanding outward in every direction. In the very center, there stood a single large bed, covered in white sheets. On top of the bed, Hiya and Damalynas lay together, each completely naked.

"Lady Rys is so lucky..." Damalynas cooed. She was lying on Hiya's arm, tracing patterns on their chest with her finger. "Getting to have the child of her beloved Lord Flio..." She gave Hiya a soft little kiss.

Hiya was capable of manifesting whatever physical gender they wished. Right now, they were in a more masculine form. "Indeed..." they said. "Lady Rys seems to be overjoyed."

"She does..." Damalynas sighed softly. "Your Divinity... Djinn like you don't leave descendants, do they...?"

"We do not," Hiya said in their usual cool and collected voice. "There are no tales of it being done."

Damalynas puckered up her lips in displeasure and clung close to Hiya. "But I..." she started, "I love you so much, Your Divinity... Oh,

but you're always so kind to me, and you take such good care of me... I suppose that's plenty. I suppose..."

She hugged Hiya again, and Hiya gently returned the embrace. "Damalynas..." they breathed.

"Y-Yes?"

"Once," they began, "I believed myself to be all-knowing and all-powerful. However, I had overlooked one field of knowledge—the knowledge of love. When I observed the love the Exalted One shares with his wife... Ah, but the Exalted One forbade me to look, so I have not since." Hiya cleared their throat. "I wanted to experience sexual love for myself," they said. "It has become an interest of mine. And so I began training with you, Damalynas. Of all the djinn who have existed throughout history, I believe I am the first to take up such a pursuit."

"So..." Damalynas's eyes went wide. "So that means..."

Hiya nodded. "Yes. I believe I may be the first djinn ever to love a woman."

"So, you and I..."

"Would trying it not also be part of our training?" Hiya kissed Damalynas full on the lips. Damalynas melted into their arms, a smile on her face, and the two lay back down together on the bed.

◇One Month Later—The Doorway to Flio and Rys's Room◇

Flio waited in the hallway outside his and Rys's room, clearly unable to stop worrying. The other members of his household were gathered around in a line behind him. The time between Rys's contractions had been getting shorter and shorter. Everyone except Uliminas and Byleri, who were assisting with the birth, waited outside the room.

"Dada..." Wyne said, pulling on Flio's arm and looking up at him with anxious eyes. "Is mama gonna be okay?"

Flio smiled cheerfully down at Wyne. "She'll be okay," he said. "Uliminas has lots of experience helping demons give birth from her time in the Dark Army."

"Good," Wyne said, smiling back. "I'm glad."

A few minutes later, Wyne pulled at Flio's arm again, looking up at him with an identical expression as before. "Dada..." she said. "Is mama gonna be okay?"

She was so worried about Rys that she completely forgot the earlier conversation.

Wyne was not Flio and Rys's child by birth. She had been saved by the couple when they found her collapsed in the forest. She imprinted on them for saving her life, and ever since, treated them like her parents.

Flio patted Wyne softly on her head. "Everything will be okay," he said. "Uliminas and Byleri have lots of experience delivering children."

"Good," Wyne said, smiling again. "I'm glad."

A short distance away, Balirossa, Blossom, and Belano were watching. Their faces were pale as beads of nervous sweat formed on their brows.

"Hey, Balirossa," said Blossom in a whisper.

"Yes, Blossom?"

"I know Byleri *said* she's delivered tons of children, but—"

"She meant horses," Balirossa finished. "Absolutely."

"Whaddya think, Belano?" Blossom asked. "You think so too?"

"Yeah..." Belano said, joining in on the hushed conversation. "I had just been thinking that myself..."

"That Byleri," said Blossom. "Barging her way into the room like that..."

"It happened too fast for me to stop her..." said Balirossa.

Blossom sighed. "Anyway, I suppose all we can do is pray..."

"Yes," said Balirossa. "Shall we?"

Belano nodded, and the three bowed their heads and joined their hands in prayer.

Suddenly, they could hear the sound of a baby crying from inside the room. Flio, Wyne, Ghozal, and Hiya all rushed to the doorway. The moment seemed to stretch out forever. And then, before their eyes, the door crept open. "Mew can come in," Uliminas said, a big grin on her face. "The delivery was a success!"

"Thank you *so much*, Uliminas," Flio said, bowing his head to her.

"Oh, my lord husband..." said Rys when she heard his voice. She was lying down in bed, smiling happily. Next to her were two newborn babies.

"You, like, got a healthy pair of twins!" Byleri said, grinning. She had been the one to clean the two babies. "A boy and a girl!"

Flio smiled at his children. They were a little larger than a human newborn would typically be. Right now, they were lying next to Rys, sleeping peacefully. "My lord husband..." Rys said once more.

"Rys, you did amazing," said Flio, taking her hand in his. "Good job!"

"Thank you..." Rys said, smiling through her tears.

"Hey Uli-Uli," said Wyne, standing impatiently on the other side of the door. "Can I come in yet? Pretty please?" She was sick of waiting.

"Not yet," said Uliminas. She was standing in front of the door, not allowing anyone but Flio to pass. "Wait just a meowment." She

wanted to allow the couple some time alone with their children.

A little while later, Flio waved them in. Wyne didn't wait a second. She immediately burst into the room, at the head of the group. "Babies! Babies! Twins! Twins!" she sang. She grinned ear to ear as she looked at them.

"Hrm," said Ghozal. He too was smiling. "They seem like a wonderful pair."

Wyne looked up at Flio. "Hey dada," she said, "what are you gonna name them?"

"Names, hm?" Flio said. He seemed to be back to his usual carefree self. "I have some ideas, actually..." He looked around at the assembled crowd before looking back to Rys, meeting her eyes. "Garyl for the boy," he said, "and Elinàsze for the girl. Garyl is from Rys's brother's name, and Elinàsze... Elinàsze is the name of the goddess of love from my homeworld. What do you think, Rys?"

A soft smile spread slowly over Rys's face. "Garyl and Elinàsze... I think they're lovely names." Rys looked over at her children. "So you are Garyl," she said in a gentle voice, "and you are Elinàsze." She stroked her babies on the head, who seemed very happy for their mother's touch.

Flio watched Rys and their children, a carefree smile on his face.

◇A Forest—Klyrode Army Stronghold◇

MacTaulo, a hero of renown and the commander of the stronghold, grinned happily. "You don't say! Mister Flio and Missus Rys had twins?"

"Yes," said Greanyl, who had brought him the news. "And that is why I have been placed in command of this shipment." Smiling, she handed MacTaulo the paperwork for a delivery.

"Those two have been a great help to us," MacTaulo said as he accepted the papers. "I must pay them a visit to offer my congratulations. Ah ha ha!"

One of the soldiers at the stronghold by the name of Benimo darted up to MacTaulo as he was speaking. "Lord MacTaulo! What are you saying?!" he said. He seemed distraught. "Aren't we in a standoff against the lichsteed Sleip of the Infernal Four? What do you mean *pay them a visit*?!" Benimo squared his shoulders accusingly and raised his voice in anger. "What in the blazes is *wrong* with you?!"

"Ah, that's right," MacTaulo said. "You were only recently transferred here from the Magic Corps." He strolled over to the window of the simple two-story command post built in the middle of his base, and looked out over the forest to the wooden palisades that marked the enemy camp. "Sleip is gone."

"What?" Benimo was stunned. This stronghold was the

encampment of Klyrode's forces closest to the Dark Citadel. That was why they had deployed a storied figure like MacTaulo here—to hold this point. Only MacTaulo could have held the line against the cunning strategies of the veteran warrior Sleip, and only Sleip could defend against an attack from MacTaulo's forces. That state of affairs was well understood by both the Klyrode military and the Dark Army.

"We don't know what happened, but for some time now, that position has been under the command of Sleip's subordinate, the nightmare Dalc Horst."

"Is he better than Sleip?" Benimo asked.

MacTaulo smirked. "You could count the number of commanders in this world who could outmatch Sleip on one hand," he said. "We're planning an all-out assault in the near future. That's why we requested reinforcements from the Magic Corps."

"I-I see..." Benimo nodded. It seemed like he understood.

"If we can destroy that encampment, the Dark Army will be forced to retreat from the area. After that, we'll all have a bit more room to breathe." MacTaulo grinned as he stared at the walls of the Dark Army encampment. "I suppose demons have problems of their own," he said. "I wonder what happened."

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

The Dark One Yuigarde sat on his throne, grumbling in irritation. Kneeling before him was the lichsteed Sleip with his head bowed. Beside him were the other Infernals—Yorminyt the Serpent Princess, Hugi-Mugi the doppeladler, and Calsi'im the skeleton. Phufun, who had been standing at attention beside Yuigarde, took a step forward.

Phufun was dressed in a daringly revealing outfit, looking every bit the succubus she was. She pressed her false glasses up against the ridge of her nose and began to speak. "Lichsteed Sleip," she said, "I will ask you again: why has it taken you so long to fulfill the Dark One's orders and crush a single human stronghold?"

Sleip sighed deeply. He was getting sick of this question. It had been a week since he was called back to the Dark Citadel, and it seemed like every day he was summoned to the throne room and asked the same question. *A single stronghold, she says... he thought. Give me a godsdamned break. That place is defended by Commander MacTaulo! He's the best the humans have! It's not going to fall easily. And most of my force now is raw recruits we conscripted into service! They've pulled half of my elite teams out to deal with Zanzibar. How do they expect me to fight in these conditions?!*

He kept those thoughts to himself. "It is due to my unworthiness, My Lord," he said.

"Tch," Yuigarde spat. "This again. I'm sick of your excuses." He

stood up from his throne.

“Oh, my!” said Calsi'im, leaping up. “Lord Yuigarde! Please, calm yourself for just a moment.” He stepped between Sleip and Yuigarde, knelt down, and pressed his bony head to the floor. “That stronghold is an important position for the Klyrode army! If we attack recklessly, we may very well take tremendous losses! I believe, My Lord, that under the present circumstances, we should avoid risking our fighting strength as much as possible. After all, we have Zanzibar and his rebellion to worry about! So please, I beg you...control your anger!”

Yuigarde looked down at Calsi'im and clicked his tongue. “I'll let it slide just this once,” he said. “Out of respect for Calsi'im.” He turned his head away from the Infernals like a petulant child.

Phufun adjusted her glasses once again. “Sleip,” she said, “you are to finish off the Klyrode army by tomorrow and report back. That is all.”

“As you wish,” Sleip said, dispirited. He bowed and left the throne room. Calsi'im followed after him, clearly agitated.

Yorminyt watched her two colleagues leave. *He humiliated Sssleip in front of usss on purposse. She looked at Yuigarde and sighed. Sssleip is the sssenior of the Infernal Four. Thisss is a threat to usss, issn't it? Yuigarde... Lord Ghozal would have never done sssomething like that.*

Hugi-Mugi had kept their eyes closed during the meeting and stood glued to their spot. They did not wish to see Sleip be subjected to Yuigarde's abuse.

Yuigarde stood up and gave Yorminyt and Hugi-Mugi a sidelong glance. “Hmph,” he said. “Useless, the lot of them.” Then, he turned to address Phufun. “Hey, Phufun. What's Zanzibar's gang up to?”

“Master, they have withdrawn from the area of the fortress you destroyed yesterday. It seems that they retreated to the mountains and assembled a defensive line.”

“Right!” Yuigarde said, walking towards the exit to the throne room. “Then I'll go crush that defensive line of theirs like I did their fortress! I'll make an example of that man!”

“E-Excuse me!” Phufun went to chase after him. “Master Yuigarde! You should take Yorminyt and Hugi-Mugi with you to—”

“Who needs 'em!” Yuigarde laughed uproariously. “Ever since I started going out to the front, Zanzibar's been eating defeat after defeat! I should've done this from the start instead of relying on my useless minions!”

Yuigarde laughed and laughed as he tromped down the corridor away from the throne room, Phufun running after him. Yorminyt waited until they were gone before looking up at the throne and sighed. “He won't listen to usss...” she said. “He doesssn't need usss...”

It'sss like we aren't Infernalssss at all..."

Hugi-Mugi's two heads sighed as well. "Unbecoming it is, yes! Very unbecoming," they said.

Sleip, Yorminyt, and Hugi-Mugi had once assisted Yuigarde in his bid to seize power from the Dark One Gholl in an attempt to wake Gholl up and snap him out of his growing tendency to favor diplomacy with humans over conflict. But when Gholl received Yuigarde's challenge, he instead abdicated his throne without a fight and left the Dark Citadel. And now Yuigarde was expecting victories from Sleip without giving him enough soldiers and leaving Yorminyt and Hugi-Mugi disused in the Dark Citadel, refusing to give them orders to attack.

Yorminyt and Hugi-Mugi sighed again. If only they had known.

◇Inside the Dark Citadel◇

Calsi'im shook his head as he walked down the hallway. He was wearing a majestic black robe in a futile attempt to look the part of an Infernal, but it failed to lend any semblance of dignity to the ancient and shriveled skeleton beneath it. "Phew..." he said. "I somehow managed to get through to Lord Yuigarde, but goodness me! And after this, I have to interview the prospective recruits and repair the damaged parts of the castle! I suppose this is what I get for talking back. I can't say I *love* doing chores like this, but an order is an order..." He took out a written itinerary and looked it over, rubbing his aching shoulders with an air of great reluctance.

Calsi'im had been awarded his position—the fourth seat of the Infernal Four left unfilled after the death of Fengaryl the lupine—for his desperate defense of the Dark Citadel when it had come under attack by Zanzibar's forces while Yuigarde the Dark One was away. He had used his knowledge of tactics to hold out against Zanzibar, but he was old, even for a demon, and did not have the strength to lead soldiers on the field of battle. As a result, he ended up mostly doing odd jobs that Yuigarde's minion Phufun saw fit to foist on him.

"I too would like to have a minion, if I could!" he said, talking to himself as he walked down the hallway. "Surely that is not too much to ask for someone of my standing." He stopped, having caught sight of something. "Hm? What's this?" In one corner of the hallway, someone had dumped a pile of garbage. It must have been left over from the cleanup of Zanzibar's attack on the Dark Citadel. In the pile, among the other trash, was a magic doll.

"Hm..." Calsi'im mused. "One of the magic dolls we used as a diversion when Zanzibar attacked..." The doll showed no signs of moving; it looked to be out of magic. Its clothing was in tatters, and its arms had been torn off. "Hmmm..."

He took the magic doll in his arms. "Well!" he said. "A doll like this would be a perfect minion! If it were moving, anyway!"

His mind made up, Calsi'im took the doll and headed towards Phufun's laboratory.

◇Klyrode Castle—The Maiden Queen's Chambers◇

A great big smile spread over the Maiden Queen's face when she heard. "You don't say!" she said. "Lord Flio is having a child?"

"So it seems," said the Third Princess, who had brought the Queen the news. "I heard it from the Fli-o'-Rys staff when they came to deliver our latest shipment." She smiled back at her older sister.

The Queen's smile seemed to grow even brighter. "We must find the time to pay him a courtesy visit! After all, Lord Flio has been such a great help to this kingdom in so many ways..."

Flio had been treated cruelly at the hands of the former king of Klyrode, who had deemed him unfit to be a hero and essentially had him exiled in an attempt to be rid of him. Yet despite that, Flio was more than willing to assist the Maiden Queen, who had deposed her father and taken command of the forces of Klyrode. Without his help, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode would have been destroyed by Hiya, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, or Damalynas, the Grand Magus of Midnight, without the Dark Army needing to ever invade.

The Maiden Queen was well aware of how much she owed Flio. She took care every day to be mindful of her gratitude towards him. Over time, she had come to place great trust in Flio, and did her best to accommodate him in every way she could.

"Let me see," the Queen said, picking up her daily planner from her desk and opening it to check her schedule. "When would be a good time...?"

"My sister," said the Third Princess, "shall I have a look at your schedule? There must be *some* time between the meetings and the state visits..."

"Ah," the Queen said, looking up from the book, "would you, sister? I am terribly sorry to impose, but I do appreciate it."

"Of course! I am happy to be of service!" the Third Princess said, cheerfully strolling over to the chamber door. She had been doing such work for her sister even back when she was the crown princess and not yet queen. When she wasn't helping with administration, she spent her days studying political science, economics, and military tactics, all so that she could one day be of more use to her sister. Her efforts had borne fruit, and now she had become something like an aide and advisor to her sister, the Queen. Nothing could have given her more joy.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” the Third Princess said, stopping herself before stepping out of the room. “I have a message for you from Fli-o’-Rys.”

“A message? What is it?”

“I was asked to tell you that they are no longer selling lembon cakes, my sister.”

The Queen balked. “What?”

“That is all they said.” And with that, she left the room.

The Maiden Queen was left alone, her face white. “What?” she repeated. “No longer selling...lembon cakes...?”

The truth is, Rys had started baking lembon cakes to sell as a way to dispose of her excess lembons. She had read in a book somewhere that pregnant women crave sour foods, and got carried away buying crate after crate of them. In the end, Rys had found that she didn’t crave sour fruits at all, so she stuffed the last lembon cakes—which had been a hot seller—into her Bottomless Bag. She kept selling them, but this shipment to Klyrode Castle was the last. They were sold out indefinitely.

The Maiden Queen stood still in shock, pressing the palms of her hands against her cheeks. *My... My only comfort*, she thought. *It was because I had lembon cakes that I could work late into the evening night after night! It was because I had lembon cakes that I could endure meeting after meeting! Now what do I have to look forward to?! What do I have that will get me through every grueling day?!*

◇A Building Somewhere◇

The Shadow King sat on his decadent armchair in a dimly lit room. He had once been king of Klyrode, but when his daughter brought his many wicked deeds to light, he was deposed and forced to leave the castle. It was then that he became the Shadow King. When he was king, he had engaged in all kinds of shady underworld dealings—but now, that had become his main business. He had been working the black market, proceeding smoothly on his plan to make an absolute killing. But the Queen responded by instituting greater countermeasures against illegal economic activity. Conditions were bad, and the days wore on with no payout for the Shadow King’s schemes.

“Tell me,” he said. “How have things been proceeding for the two of you?”

Before him were the demon fox sisters: Kintsuno the Gold, wearing her gold cheongsam, and Gintsuno the Silver in her matching silver cheongsam. These two were once the leaders of the Demon Fox Clan, a group of demons affiliated with the Dark Army. However, one day their stronghold was crushed in some freak accident, and the

Demon Fox Clan was no more. Following the accident, they had joined forces with the Shadow King and began working as members of his organization.

Kintsuno sighed. “Unfortunately, the Maiden Queen’s campaign against our organization has been working. We haven’t been able to make any real progress. And the funds we had stockpiled vanished somewhere in that strange accident.”

“But,” said Gintsuno, smiling, “the general store we opened in Sojieya has been doing surprisingly well! Thanks to that, we haven’t been going hungry.”

The Shadow King clicked his tongue. “The Shadow King, the master of underground dealings, reduced to managing a *general store* to make ends meet...”

“It’s just our luck...” said Kintsuno, pensive. “We still don’t know what happened when our stronghold was destroyed. The survivors said there was some kind of monster with a golden head.”

“Our stockpile vanished too...” Gintsuno said. “The survivors said something about pitfalls.”

The Shadow King grunted. “Yes, yes, it’s been one thing after another. Nothing has gone right for some time.”

◇In a Forest◇

“Aaaaah-choooey!” Hero Gold-Hair sneezed violently as he walked down the forest path.

“A-Are you okaaay?” Tsuya, who was walking alongside him, asked. “Hero Gooold-Hair!” She looked at him with big, worried eyes.

“Ah, it’s nothing. I’m fine. I just suddenly had the urge to sneeze!”

“Maaaybe someone was taaalking about you.”

“Could be,” Gold-Hair said, folding his arms. “Not that it matters. But that being said, Tsuya, it’s about time we came up with another scheme to get some money. The cash we have on hand is starting to run low.”

“O-Oh,” said Tsuya. “I supppooose.” She crossed her arms too, deep in thought.

“No mistakes like the time you mixed up the Champion’s Armor with the Cambion’s Armor!” Gold-Hair reminded her. “That thing turned me into some strange monster with a golden head! What a mess...”

“I knooow,” said Tsuya, her head drooping apologetically. “I’m sooo sooorry for what happened...”

“And then there was the time we heard those rumors about a wagon train carrying some kind of shady goods!” he said. “I mean, we had fun dropping the wagons in pitfall traps, and we got our hands on a lot of stuff, but...”

“But then we stayed a few nights at that reaaaally fancy inn and lost all our moooney!” Tsuya sobbed.

“Y-Yes,” Gold-Hair said. “I suppose that one is actually somewhat my fault. I’m sorry, Tsuya.” He bowed just slightly.

“Oh, no no no,” Tsuya said, shaking her head frantically. “You don’t have to apooologize, Hero Gooold-Hair!”

“Well, one way or another, we should find some city to make our home base. I’m tired of this vagabond lifestyle.”

“Me tooooo. It’s aaall because of that boooounty. We can’t ever seeettle doooown...”

“Tell me about it!” Hero Gold-Hair said, grumbling. “Making us wanted criminals just because we borrowed a few things from their castle sanctuary! Those Klyrode folks are out of their minds!”

“Um...” Tsuya said under her breath. “I thiiink it’s pretty normal since we stooole the castle’s treaaaasure...”

“What was that, Tsuya?” Gold-Hair said, narrowing his eyes.

Tsuya jumped in the air and shook her head, speaking in a falsetto. “Fwah ha ha?! Nooo! I didn’t saaay anything!”

Hero Gold-Hair shot her a suspicious glance and began walking deeper into the forest. “Well, whatever. Anyway, we need to find a spot to set up camp while it’s still light out.”

“O-Okaaaay! I’m coooming!” Tsuya gave Gold-Hair an exaggerated salute before the two ran off into the distance.

Chapter 2: The Creeping Shadow

“Gwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!” The Dark One Yuigarde swung his iron club wildly, smashing through rank after rank of the enemy. Zanzibar’s rebellion couldn’t stand up to his ferocity. They were in a total rout.

“Damn him, that amoeba-brain!” Zanzibar cursed, watching Yuigarde rampage from afar as he fled on horseback.

His lieutenant Meiden rode beside him. “I thought the Dark One Yuigarde was just some meathead,” she said, a bitter expression on her face, “but this is ridiculous! I never *imagined* we were so outmatched.”

The two rode into the forest at a fast gallop, the rest of the rebellion following behind in a frantic retreat. “Zanzibar!” Yuigarde yelled as he took chase from behind. “This is the day I’ll have your head!”

Yuigarde was crude, rough, and ill-tempered by nature, and moreover he had suffered a decisive defeat when he led the whole Dark Army to attack Klyrode Castle. To Zanzibar, it seemed like he did not have the charisma necessary to keep the Dark Army together as a coherent force.

“This is my chance!” Zanzibar decided. “I will strike down Yuigarde and become the new Dark One!”

He had launched a rebellion against Yuigarde, but the Dark One wasted no time in retaking the Dark Citadel, stopping his plan to declare himself the new Dark One. And now he was forced to retreat, bunkering down and trying to fend off Yuigarde’s attacks.

However...

◇ A Mansion, High in the Mountains ◇

Zanzibar finally managed to shake off Yuigarde’s pursuit and retreated to one of his hidden bases—a mansion hidden high in the mountains. For a while he just threw a tantrum, grinding his teeth in irritation and stomping on the floor. “That blasted Yuigarde! It’s been one defeat after another ever since he took to the field!”

Meiden’s lips were pursed in a thin straight line. “We assumed that with the Dark Citadel under attack, he would lock himself inside and not come out. It was a terrible miscalculation. We were going to separate the Infernal Four and deal with them individually before

launching an all-out assault on the Dark Citadel, but the Infernals never left..."

"Not only that," Zanzibar said through gritted teeth, "but we had no idea how strong Yuigarde was. I thought he was nothing compared to Gholl, but he might be even stronger..."

Meiden knitted her brow. "The Dark One's rampaging power scattered our main force into the wind," she said. "Some of them were captured, some of them surrendered, and more of them were defecting to join the Dark Army each day. And now all the demons watching this incident will come to the conclusion that they have us outmatched. That will only lead more of them to side with the Dark Army."

"Gah!" Zanzibar shouted, slamming his fists into a desk in a fit of rage and splintering it into a million pieces. "I hate it!" He lifted his eyes to look at Meiden, panting hard as he spoke. "Meiden, *tell me* you have a plan. Tell me you have *some* way to turn this around."

Meiden pressed her clenched fist to her lips. She stood silent in thought for a while, until suddenly she raised her index finger into the air. "One, anyway," she said.

"What?"

"One, anyway. I can think of *one* plan, Master."

"Really?! You can?!" Zanzibar ran over to Meiden and grabbed her firmly by the shoulders. Meiden nodded seriously. "What is it?" Zanzibar asked. "Tell me, Meiden!"

"Yes..." Meiden said. "Perhaps...we could call on the Mistress of Evil..."

"What?!" Zanzibar's eyes shot open at Meiden's words. "*The Mistress of Evil?! The goddess who rules the Dark World? The goddess who allows the Dark One to use the power of that land in exchange for tribute? Isn't she allied with the Dark One? Why would they lend us any aid?*"

Meiden's lips curled up in a smile. "I'll just say that it's possible, Master," she said.

"It is?! Truly?!"

Suddenly, another woman's voice intruded on their conversation. "Oh, certainly," she said. "It is *quite* possible."

"Mmh?!" Nobody was allowed in the estate's chambers without Zanzibar's permission. He turned to look at the source of the voice, and found a woman standing there. Zanzibar wasn't sure where she had come from. *I couldn't sense her presence at all...* he thought, but he stifled his surprise to face the woman with a coolheaded demeanor.

The woman was slender, and dressed in the garb of a shadow demon—brown and black, and styled like a ninja outfit. Meiden stepped up to the woman. "Master," she said, "this is Riliangiu. She is

one of the Mistress of Evil's familiars."

"What?!" Zanzibar couldn't maintain his cool. His eyes were wide open in shock.

The woman—Riliangiu—stepped forward. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mister Zanzibar," she said. "I am Riliangiu. My people have long served as intermediaries between the Dark One and the goddess Sterner, Mistress of Evil." She placed her right arm to her chest in a salute.

Zanzibar stared intently at Riliangiu, not concealing his distrust in the slightest. "And why is a familiar who works as an intermediary with Yuigarde here? Isn't the Mistress of Evil on friendly terms with the Dark One?"

"I am here because of two men," she said. "The Dark One Gholl, and the Dark One Yuigarde."

"Gholl and Yuigarde?"

"Yes. For generations, the Dark Ones of this world made offerings to the Mistress of Evil in exchange for a blessing of magic power from the Dark World. My people have long served as the collectors of that tribute, but—"

"But the Dark One Gholl stopped paying your mistress tribute?" Zanzibar interrupted. "Is that it?"

"Precisely." Riliangiu nodded.

Zanzibar folded his arms and thought. *I can believe it. No Dark One has ever had as much magic power as Gholl. Perhaps he did not feel it necessary to obtain the power of the Dark World...* "But," he said, realizing something, "the current Dark One is Yuigarde. He's all brawn and no brain. He has nothing like the sort of magic power Gholl wielded. He must have a use for the power of the Dark World. Can you not come to the same arrangement with him?"

Riliangiu gave him a wry smirk. "I am afraid the goddess Sterner is rather angry with Yuigarde."

"Angry?"

"Indeed. That man tried to draw out the power of the Dark World by force in order to defeat the Dark One Gholl. The goddess Sterner does not look fondly on such actions."

"I see..." A smirk came to Zanzibar's face. *He really is all brawn and no brain*, he thought. *To think he would incur the wrath of the Mistress of Evil!* "So," he continued, "you, a familiar of the Mistress of Evil, came to us, prepared to offer me the blessing of power?"

"Just so." She saluted again, holding her hand in front of her chest. "If you agree to offer this world to the Mistress of Evil, she will grant you the power of the Dark World with which to conquer this one. In exchange, the Dark Ones of this world will be entrusted with its administration."

“Offer the world to the Mistress of Evil...” Zanzibar mused. “That’s a lot to ask, isn’t it? The previous Dark Ones only made yearly offerings in exchange for her acknowledgment as Dark One, if I’m not mistaken.”

“That was the arrangement with those who already ruled as Dark One. You seek to defeat the Dark One of this world, do you not? I have heard reports that the former Dark One Gholl is still alive and in good health, as well.” As she spoke, Riliangiu took a jewel from a pouch on her belt. It seemed to shine with an inner light. “It will not be enough to defeat the Dark One. You must send the former Dark One to his grave as well. Then you must crush the human kingdom of Klyrode. In exchange, we will offer you power. Is that acceptable?”

Riliangiu set the jewel on the ground at her feet and began to chant. As she did, the jewel’s light grew brighter and brighter until it became a great magic circle. *That jewel!* Zanzibar thought. *Could that possibly be the Jewel of Passage, the one that can allegedly conjure a gate between this world and the Dark World?!*

While Zanzibar’s mind was racing, a vast gate materialized above the jewel. It slowly opened. Zanzibar and Meiden watched with bated breath. Then, a woman appeared, with beautiful black hair almost long enough to reach her feet. Her hair billowed around her like a cloud as she alighted to the ground. She wore brown clothing, but her outfit covered very little of her body. She laughed under her voice as she turned to look at Zanzibar.



“So, you’re little Zanzibar?” she asked. “I am Valentine, one of the Twelve Evil Generals.”

“The Twelve Evil Generals?!” That title sent Zanzibar reeling. *The Twelve Evil Generals?! Those are the direct subordinates of the Mistress of Evil! The greatest warriors in the Dark World! I-If one of them is on our side...* “Ah ha ha ha ha!” Zanzibar laughed triumphantly. “This world is as good as mine!” He got down on one knee. “I agree to your terms,” he said. “I will offer this world, and everything in it, to the goddess Sterner, Mistress of Evil!”

Valentine glanced over at Riliangiu. “This is the boy?” she asked. “Your new candidate for Dark One?”

“Yes, General,” Riliangiu said. “This is he.”

“Hm.” Valentine chuckled as she looked over Zanzibar. “He’s quick on the uptake, at least,” she said. “That makes things easier.” Behind her, the gate she had passed through made a loud sound and vanished, scattering into the air. “Well,” Valentine said. “It looks like my own magic power was all the Jewel of Passage could handle. Riliangiu, is everything ready to complete the Grand Passage?”

“Yes, General. Everything is complete. All we need now is the magic circle.”

“I see.” Valentine chuckled, and a lavish armchair appeared behind her. She sat down. “Well then, get on it! Chop chop. Summon me my three djinn so I can bring this world to heel!”

“It will be done.” Riliangiu saluted the general and vanished.

As if he were swapping out with Riliangiu, Zanzibar stepped in front of Valentine and knelt again. His lieutenant Meiden knelt behind him. “G-General Valentine,” he stammered, “what would you have us do? Speak, and we will obey.”

“Hee hee hee... Well, I certainly appreciate the sentiment,” Valentine chuckled. “But all I want *you* to do, boy, is act the part of the new Dark One. I’ll take care of everything.”

“Ahh...” said Zanzibar in relief. “I am glad to hear it...”

“Hee hee... We’re getting the world out of this deal,” she said. “So think of it as *on the house*.” Now, she thought, *I wonder how much entertainment this world will give me? Oh, I can’t wait!*

◇Underground◇

Tsuya cried out with joy at the enormous vein of magic gems before her eyes. “Wow, Hero Gold-Haaair! This is amazing!”

Hero Gold-Hair was digging farther ahead. The gems gleamed beautifully in the light of Tsuya’s magic lantern. “Yes!” he said. “When I saw fragments of magic gems on the top of this hill, my intuition told me there’d be a vein of magic gems down here.” He hoisted his

Drilldozer Shovel over his shoulders, a triumphant grin on his face. "Okay, Tsuya! Let's get ourselves a handful of these gems!"

He got back to work, wielding his Drilldozer Shovel vigorously as he excavated the magic gems. Tsuya followed along, putting the gems into her Bottomless Bag. The two labored on, beaming happily.

◇At the Foot of a Hill in the Forest◇

Riliangiu raced through the forest until she came upon a smallish hill. She stopped and looked up. "Yes, this is the spot. At a glance, this looks like an ordinary hill, but underneath lies an abundant vein of magic gems. I will use the power of those gems and open the Grand Passage, connecting this world with the Realm of Evil." She pointed at the ground and began to chant.

Her body shone brightly, the light concentrated into the tip of her right hand. After a moment of this, she released it. "T-Tch..." she grumbled. "Casting the Grand Passage is going to take every last bit of magic power in my body." She steeled herself and continued chanting. Before her, a great magic circle appeared.

Riliangiu gasped. "Th-That's one..." She nodded proudly at the completed magic circle. The amount of magic she had used was taking a toll on her body, though. She was panting and heaving her shoulders for breath. "Th-Three more to go..."

And then, she vanished.

◇Several Minutes Later◇

From the hill near the magic circle, the sound of digging could be heard. Slowly, it grew louder and louder until a portion of the ground crumbled, the head of a shovel peeking through. A man's voice rang through the air as the shovel moved from left to right, widening the hole. When it was big enough for a human to pass through, the man stepped out.

Hero Gold-Hair let out a big sigh of relief. "It seems we made it back to the surface."

Tsuya followed along from behind, just as happy to be in the fresh air. "Yeeeah! I thought we were dooone for when the tunnel entrance collaaapsed!"

"Well, but still!" Gold-Hair said, patting the Bottomless Bag on his belt. "Who would've thought there were so many magic gems under that hill?" The bag was as big as a fist, but inside it could fit about as much as your average treasury. It could carry a truly staggering amount of magic gems.

"But you know," he continued, "I got a bit of a look from the top of the hill. I think this vein might continue deeper into the forest!"

Tsuya nodded along, beaming happily. “And *these* definitely aren’t stolen goods, so there’s no reason we can’t sell them in town! Let’s go, Tsu—yah?!” Suddenly, something near his foot caught Hero Gold-Hair’s eye. “What are these lines?” He stared down where Riliangiu’s magic circle was etched into the earth. “I’m not sure what this is,” he said, “but probably best to get rid of it.”

“Reeeally??” Tsuya said. “You thiiink so?”

“Yes. My intuition is telling me it’s better off erased.” Hero Gold-Hair took his shovel back out from his magic bag, while Tsuya retrieved her own. The two dug out the area of the magic circle, and tossed the dirt around to ruin it.

The magic circle was composed of lines etched with the power of Riliangiu’s magic. An ordinary shovel would simply dig out the earth beneath it without touching the lines themselves. They weren’t physical lines that could be moved in such a way. However, this was the Drilldozer Shovel—a treasure passed from generation to generation in the royal line of Klyrode. Not only could it dig deep holes in the blink of an eye, but it was enchanted to dig on unimpeded, no matter the obstruction. Gold-Hair and Tsuya dug up the magic circle Riliangiu had spent so much of her magic to cast, and erased it.



A while later, Hero Gold-Hair sighed with exhaustion as he surveyed the site where the magic circle used to be. “Right! That does it!”

“Hero Gold-Haaaair!” said Tsuya, proffering a handkerchief. “Use this to wiiiipe yourself off!”

“Thank you, Tsuya!” Hero Gold-Hair wiped the sweat from his brow. “Well then! We should head to a nearby town for now and sell all these gems! Let’s go, Tsuya!” he said, and headed off towards the road.

“Okaaay, Hero Gold-Haaaair! I’m coooming!” Tsuya followed along, a smile on her face. “Do you thiiink they’re vaaaluable?”

“Mm. This is just my intuition speaking, but I think they just might fetch a good price.”

“Yaaaay! And theeen, let’s go get a good meal! It’s been sooo looong...”

“Let’s! It doesn’t hurt to indulge from time to time!”

“Hooraaay! I can’t waaait!”

Chatting on, the two vanished into the forest.

◇Half a Day Later◇

A stunned look came over Riliangiu’s face as she finished the fourth magic circle. “Something... Something’s wrong...” She had set magic circles in all directions surrounding the hill. With them and the power of the lode of magic gems underground, it *should* have opened the Grand Passage to connect the world of Klyrode to the Dark World—the Realm of Evil. But even though it had already been an hour since she’d finished the fourth, there was no sign of anything magical happening anywhere nearby.

She sunk down to the ground, completely baffled. “What happened? I’m certain I set the magic circles properly...” She had expended almost all the magic power in her body creating those circles—she couldn’t even muster the force to stand. “I can only imagine that something unexpected has happened. I should... I should investigate...”

Riliangiu tried her hardest to take to her feet, but her knees buckled and she collapsed to the ground once more. “But...” she said. “But first I’ll take a little rest...” She spread out her arms and legs, and lay down on the forest floor.

◇Meanwhile, in a Nearby Town◇

Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya stood in a general store, a number of their freshly excavated magic gems set out on the counter. The person

behind the counter—a woman with silver hair—eyed the gems hungrily and adjusted her glasses.

“Well?” said Gold-Hair, eager to move things along. “How much can we get for these?”

The woman looked up. “These are excellent-quality magic gems.” She yipped—and then caught herself, covering her mouth. “A-Ahem! Yes, magic gems. I’ll buy them for a high price.” She gave them a strained smile, hoping they hadn’t noticed her earlier blunder, and withdrew a bag of coins from underneath the counter.

“Huh?!” gasped Hero Gold-Hair.

“Woow!” chirped Tsuya. The two cried for joy. The bag was much, *much* bigger than what they had expected.

“If you’re giving us this much for the magic gems, *I* certainly don’t have an objection!” said Gold-Hair. “I’ll take you at your word! We’ll sell you all the magic gems we brought to town today!”

Hero Gold-Hair began to shift the magic gems from the Bottomless Bag to the counter, while the silver-haired woman smiled wickedly to herself. *That was a very low price I quoted them!* she thought. *I didn’t expect them to actually bite! But who are these two? Where are they getting so many high-quality magic gems?*

The silver-haired woman watched the magic gems pile up further and further with an expression of growing shock. “E-Excuse me,” she ventured. “Sir, may I ask where you found these magic gems?”

“Oooh!” said Tsuya. “There’s a hiiill to the— Mmph!” Hero Gold-Hair hastily shoved his hand over her grinning mouth.

“Idiot!” he whispered. “We were going to keep that vein of magic gems a secret! If some company finds out, they’ll snatch it away from under us!”

“Mghhf! O-Oooh, thaaat’s right. I’m soooorry, Hero Gold-Haaaair...” Tsuya nodded fervently.

“Um...” the silver-haired woman asked. “Sir? Ma’am?”

“Oooh!” said Tsuya in an unnatural monotone. “I’m sooo soooorry! I thoought I kneew, but I must have forgoooot! Aha ha ha...” She grinned stiffly.

“Yes, that’s it!” Hero Gold-Hair added. “If we remember, we’ll go back to dig up more! Aha ha ha ha...” He didn’t sound any more convincing.

Those two are clearly lying... the silver-haired woman thought, giving them the side-eye. *Well, whatever.* “We’ll buy any more magic gems you bring us for the same price,” she said, counting out their pay.

“Woow!”

“Yes! Thank you!” Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya looked at each other and nodded, and then stuffed the coins they had been given into their

Bottomless Bags.

“If you can bring me more magic gems by tomorrow,” the woman said, a cunning gleam in her eyes, “then I’ll offer you an extra twenty percent as a bonus.”

“Fweeeh?! Twenty perceeent?!” Tsuya’s eyes went as wide as dinner plates.

Hero Gold-Hair took Tsuya by the arm. “Tomorrow, is it? All right! I-I still don’t remember where the magic gems were,” he lied unconvincingly, “but we’ll see what we can do!” The pair left the shop with astonishing speed.

The silver-haired woman watched them go, her eyes sharp. “I must tell my sister Kintsuno the Gold at once!” she said. “We’ve found a good mark!” She yipped as she rushed to the back of the store. Her body glowed, and suddenly she transformed back into her form as Gintsuno the Silver. None of the customers took any notice.

◇Later, South of the Hill◇

When Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya made it back to the hill, they were out of breath but both had big smiles on their faces. “I neeever expected the magic gems to sell for that muuuch!” Tsuya exclaimed. “I was so surpriiiised, Hero Gold-Haaair!”

“Tell me about it!” Gold-Hair grinned. “We need to bring some more of these gems back to that shop before they change their minds! Quickly, Tsuya!”

“Yeees, sir!”

The two ran on, bobbing their heads, until they reached the site of their previous tunnel. “Hm...” said Hero Gold-Hair. “We should try somewhere else. We already dug up a good chunk of the magic gems around here!”

“Oh... Okaaay Hero Gold-Haaair!” said Tsuya. The pair continued on to the east and vanished into the trees.

A patch of grass to the west rustled, and out popped Riliangiu. She appeared so soon after Gold-Hair and Tsuya left that it looked for all the world like she was tagging in. “I thought I heard somebody talking just now...” she said as she scanned the area left and right, on high alert. She kept a careful watch for some time, and then she cocked her head, confused.

Ordinarily, it would have been easy for her to cast Search to scan the area and find Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya running along, but today she had spent most of the magic in her body creating those magic circles. She didn’t have enough magic left to cast the spell. Instead, to conserve magic, she manually searched the area with her eyes and ears. But it was not enough to detect the two running to the east.

“It must be my imagination,” she said. She didn’t sound

completely convinced, but still she stood up from the thicket and stepped forward. “Ghk!” What she saw left her stunned. “Th-The magic circle! It’s gone!”

Riliangiu stared at the patch of earth, speechless. She was sure this was the place she had set the first magic circle. It should have still been there, but because Hero Gold-Hair had followed his intuition and gotten rid of the circle, there was no sign of it anywhere.

Riliangiu had no idea what could have happened. “Th-This can’t be! I am certain this is the place! So... So... Where did it go?!” Her body was shaking, her eyes wide open. “C-Could I be in the wrong place?”

Stumbling on unsteady feet, Riliangiu went off to inspect the area and vanished into the tall grass.

◇Later Still, East of the Hill◇

At the foot of the hill there was a hole. It was clearly freshly dug, and it seemed to extend inward, underneath the hill itself. Hero Gold-Hair was sauntering out of it, his shovel resting on his shoulder and a grin on his face.

“What a haul! I knew it was the right decision to dig in from a different direction! I never imagined there were so many magic gems to dig up! We had pretty much gotten all there was to get from the south.”

Tsuya, following along after him, smiled as she spoke. The two went to look at their Bottomless Bags—each one packed full of magic gems.

“All right, Tsuya!” said Hero Gold-Hair. “Let’s take these back to that general store!” He took off in the direction of the town.

“Okaaay! Yes sir, Hero Gold-Haaaair!” Tsuya saluted and ran along after.

“But you know, Tsuya,” Gold-Hair said after a while. “I really wonder what those weird circles are...”

“I knooow. The one to the east was juuust liiike the one to the south!”

“Hm. My intuition told me I should get rid of that one too for good measure, so I took care of it with my Drilldozer Shovel! But I wonder... Do you think there’s another one to the north?”

“I dunno... Do you wanna go loook?”

Hero Gold-Hair gave it some thought. “Maybe we should,” he said. “But our Bottomless Bags are full. We should go back to sell the gems at that general store, and then come back and check out the north!”

They ran at full speed in the direction of the town as they talked, and soon vanished out of sight into the tall grass.

Rustle rustle rustle...

As soon as Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya were out of sight, a patch of tall grass in the other direction began to shake. Gintsuno the Silver parted the grass to get a better look at the scene. She chuckled and yipped. "It looks like they have no idea I followed them."

Gintsuno stepped out to get a better look at the hole Hero Gold-Hair had left behind. "Looks like, looks like!" She snickered. "And this must be where they're excavating those magic gems!"

Kintsuno the Gold emerged from behind her, followed by a number of people who looked like workers. They were carrying shovels and pickaxes—tools for excavation. They had even brought horse-drawn carts to carry the gems back.

Gintsuno crossed her arms. "That Shadow King, though," she said. "He'll provide tools and manpower, but he himself insists on *holding down the fort*. I can't help but feel a little like we're getting the short end of the stick."

Kintsuno looked at her sister, then leaned in to whisper in her ear, smirking. "Pay it no mind," she said. "Even for a human, that man is in *terrible* shape. Climbing mountains would be a lot to ask. And anyway, since he's not here, he won't notice if we sneak a few extra for ourselves!"

"I suppose that's one way of looking at it!" The two sisters grinned at each other and nodded their heads.

"That settles it then!" said Kintsuno. "Let's hurry up and help ourselves to these gems!" She waved to the workers and they started towards the hole, when suddenly they heard a woman's voice.

"You! What are you doing there?!"

"Yip?" barked Kintsuno.

"Yip yip?" barked Gintsuno. The fox sisters looked at each other.

"That wasn't me," said Kintsuno.

"That wasn't me either," said Gintsuno. "Then, who...?"

The two looked around for the source of the voice, until both pairs of eyes settled on a patch of grass. Then, from that patch, Riliangiu emerged. She was trembling as she looked back at them.

"Who are you?" asked Kintsuno.

"I've never seen you before," said Gintsuno. The two stared at the shadow demon. She seemed to be sizing them up.

"So it was you..." Riliangiu said, slowly moving closer despite her unsteady body. "It was *you* who erased my magic circles..." She crossed her arms in an X-shape in front of her, and from the elbows to the tips of her fingers they changed shape to long blades.

Kintsuno and Gintsuno transformed into giant foxes—one gold and one silver—readying for a fight. "I don't know what kind of

demon you are..." said Kintsuno.

"...But don't think for a second you can beat the demon fox sisters!" Gintsuno finished.

"Don't make me laugh." Riliangiu raised the blades on the ends of her arms. "No demon of this world is a match for me. I am Riliangiu, familiar of the Mistress of Evil!"

"Huh?"

"Th-The Mistress of Evil?!" Kintsuno and Gintsuno shrunk back, hesitating, as Riliangiu danced into the fray.



The fight was over quickly. As drained of magic as she was, Riliangiu was still a familiar of the Mistress of Evil. She called on her last reserves of power and attacked the foxes viciously.

"Wh-Who cares about the Mistress of Evil?!" said Kintsuno.

"If we combine our powers, we can overcome anything!" said Gintsuno.

But even with the two of them working together, they were knocked off their feet by the force of Riliangiu's magic. The workers had been sent flying by the attack. Only Kintsuno and Gintsuno remained.

"This isn't good!" Kintsuno yipped. "We can't beat someone from the Dark World!" Gintsuno had suffered a serious wound and lost consciousness. Kintsuno took her sister in her mouth, grabbing her by the scruff, and ran away as fast as her legs could take her, the surviving workers running along after her, fleeing for dear life.

"J-Just wait!" said Riliangiu. "I'll have your heads!" She tried to make chase, but she had pushed herself far too hard already. She didn't have the strength to keep up with Kintsuno and Gintsuno. Her arms turned back to normal, and reaching out in the direction the foxes had fled, she collapsed on the ground unconscious.

◇The Next Morning, by the Hill◇

Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya drove their wagon through the forest, grinning deliriously at each other. "Hero Gold-Haaair!" Tsuya said. "That foxlion steak we had last night was sooo good!"

"It was!" Gold-Hair nodded cheerfully. "It was so tender...like it could melt on my tongue!"

"The fiiish sooooup was really good toooo!"

"It was one of the best things I've ever eaten! It isn't often you find good seafood so high up in the mountains!"

The two rhapsodized to each other about the meal they had shared last night. Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya had made a small fortune

from selling the magic gems they had found and treated themselves to a night of luxury. They stayed at a high-class hotel, ate at a high-class restaurant, and even went ahead and bought a high-class horse-drawn wagon to drive to the hill.

“Now!” said Hero Gold-Hair. “Just like yesterday, let’s dig up the magic gems and take them back to that shop!”

“Yeaah! They saaid they’d give us an eeextra twenty perceent!”

Suddenly, Gold-Hair noticed something behind Tsuya. “Hm?”

“What iis it, Hero Gold-Haaair?” Tsuya turned to look, and found a woman collapsed on the ground.

“What’s up with her, do you think?” said Hero Gold-Hair. “Not a lot of people come this deep in the mountains. And she’s unconscious?”

“She’s riight byyy the hole you dug! She wasn’t here yeeesterday...” Tsuya pressed her index finger against her lips and tilted her head in confusion.

“Well, it isn’t our problem,” Gold-Hair said. “But still...she might show up in my dreams if I let her die by the side of the road. I guess we’d better go look.” He turned the wagon in the direction of the fallen woman.

Tsuya gazed adoringly up at Hero Gold-Hair. *Hero Gold-Haaair...* she thought. *It’s so nice when you help people like that...*

“What? Is there something on my face?”

“Nooo!” Tsuya shook her head. “It’s nooothering!” She had been staring.



With agonized slowness, Riliangu blinked awake. It felt like she had been sleeping for a long time. *Nhh... Where am I...?* Then she remembered. *That’s right... I collapsed chasing after those reprehensible louts who stole the magic gems and destroyed my magic circles...* She started to sit up.

“Oh?” She heard a man’s voice. “It looks like she’s waking up!”

“Nwuh?!” Startled, Riliangu cried out in distress. She opened her eyes to see a man’s face floating in the middle of her field of vision. He had hair like spun gold, and a *very* attractive face. He was carrying Riliangu in his arms, princess-style. Riliangu blushed red. *Wh-Wh-What is this?! Why is some golden-haired Prince Charming fellow carrying me in his arms?!* This sight of it shook her so much that she stayed in his arms, peering up at him, not moving an inch.

“Hmm...” Hero Gold-Hair said as he carried Riliangu to his wagon. “Looks like you’re doing pretty bad. I guess that’s not surprising after you collapsed in the mountains like that!”

Wh-What’s happening to my body? Riliangu thought. She couldn’t

look away from his silky, radiant hair and his utterly perfect face. He looked more and more handsome by the second. *I suppose...I should just wait and see what happens for now...* She closed her eyes and touched a hand to Gold-Hair's chest.

Just then, she heard Valentine speaking in her mind. "*Riliangiu? Riliangiu, can you hear me?*" After sleeping for a night, after a fashion, Riliangiu had recovered a bit of her magic—enough to receive telepathic communication. "*What's happening with the Grand Passage?*" Valentine asked. "*I'm getting bored of waiting.*" Her voice sounded angry.

Riliangiu's mind started racing. *It would be impossible to create the magic circles again with the amount of magic power in my body right now. And it looks like those giant foxes took the gems from under the hill, so I couldn't use them as a power source anyway. All I can do now is...* She sighed.

She focused her thoughts and responded to Valentine's message. "*I may be going outside of telepathy range,*" she said. "*And I am unavailable due to lack of consciousness.*"

"*Huh?*"

"*Please allow me to try again later.*"

"*What?! Riliangiu, what's—*"

Riliangiu cut off the conversation. *General Valentine, I am so terribly sorry, she thought. There's nothing I can do. I need to delay creating a new Grand Passage until I find another suitable location and recover my own power. I'm not doing this because I want that Prince Charming to hold me more, or because I want to get to know him. Absolutely not.*

But despite what she told herself, Riliangiu was clinging tightly to Gold-Hair's shirt.

◇A Room in Zanzibar's Mansion◇

In a room in the mansion, Valentine shouted at thin air. "*Riliangiu? Riliangiu?! Riliangiu!*" But no matter how hard she tried to project her thoughts, she wasn't able to reconnect. "*Ridiculous!*" she said. "*Worthless familiar! This is why they sent you away to this backwater world.*" She plopped down on the bed. "*If we can't summon the Grand Passage, then we can't call my armies here from the Dark World! I suppose I'll have to go looking for a suitable spot.*"

"*Although,*" she said, giggling, "*why should I, General Valentine, one of the Twelve Evil Generals, do work meant for a familiar?*" She extended her arm, and three magic circles appeared. "*This might be a waste of magic,*" she said, "*but I'll worry about that later. First, I need to summon my cuties!*"

Valentine's body began to glow ominously, and the three magic

circles grew bigger and bigger. They began to spin and then slowly descended to the floor. A figure stepped out of each of them—three djinn in total, all dressed in black vestments. Valentine giggled as they knelt before her.

“I am Maglion, the djinn who has mastered the magic of the Dark World,” said the first. “At your service, General Valentine.”

The other two followed suit. “I am Powlion, the djinn who has mastered the power of the Dark World. At your service, General Valentine.”

“I am Speelion, the djinn who has mastered the speed of the Dark World. At your service, General Valentine.”

Valentine looked over the three and grinned. “Nice, nice,” she said. “Glad the summoning went off without a hitch. Now, the four of us are going to conquer this miserable world!”

“General!” The three bowed their heads as Valentine giggled happily.

◇Klyrode Castle—Throne Room◇

The Maiden Queen sat on her throne, listening to the day’s report’s, when Boralis, the captain of her royal guard, said something that surprised her. “Did I hear you correctly, Boralis? The Shadow King’s organization?! We haven’t heard mention of them in some time. I thought that perhaps they had broken up. They are active again?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. They’ve been pretending to be an ordinary company in some town. Over the past several days, they’ve been selling an extraordinary amount of magic gems. We decided to investigate, and found the Shadow King and his accomplice Gintsuno the Silver acting as managers of the shop under assumed identities.”

“What has become of Gintsuno and the Shadow King?”

“We confiscated the magic gems and the coins they had been using to run their business,” Boralis reported, “but we were unable to apprehend the masterminds: the Shadow King, Kintsuno the Gold, and Gintsuno the Silver.”

“I see.” The Maiden Queen looked relieved. “It is a pity that the masterminds escaped, but I am glad you were able to cut off their source of funds. I would ask you to continue investigating the organization; I hope it is not too much trouble.”

Boralis nodded once, her face deadly serious. “It is not, Your Majesty. Trust me. I will arrest the three masterminds and pull out the roots of their organization.”

◇A Backstreet Somewhere◇

A carriage sped along a disused backstreet. A corpulent old man

sat up front, gripping the reins tight.

“Shadow King!” said a woman—Kintsuno the Gold—poking her head out from inside the carriage. “What’s going on?! I just got back... Why are we under attack by the Klyrode army?!”

The Shadow King clicked his tongue in annoyance. “Would you be quiet?! I wasn’t expecting this any more than you were! It must be because we made a good sum of money for once...but how did they find us so quickly?!”

“Wh-What do we do?” Kintsuno said. “They took all the magic gems Gintsuno got for cheap, and every last bit of the profit from the store! I’ve never been more frustrated in my life!” She kicked the seat in front of her and screwed up her face into a scowl.

Next to her, her sister Gintsuno lay on her side. She had been injured in the fight with Riliangiu. Her life didn’t seem to be in danger, but she still had not yet regained consciousness.

The Shadow King cracked the reins, making the horses speed up. “All we can do now,” he said, “is wait for Gintsuno to recover.”

“This is ridiculous,” said Kintsuno. “We ruled the demons of the west! We were a contender for the Dark One’s throne! How could things have gone so terribly...?”

“Believe me, I know what you mean,” said the Shadow King. “I used to be the king of Klyrode and the master of the black market!”

The two shared a look and sighed deeply as the carriage sped off towards the north, taking care to avoid being seen.

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

“I’m home!” Flio cried as he stepped in through the entryway.

Rys came out to greet him, a smile on her face. “Welcome back, my lord husband!”

Two children, who looked to be about five years of age, ran up beside her, grinning happily. “Welcome home, papa!”

“Welcome back, daddy!”

These were Flio and Rys’s children, born one month ago—Elinàsze and Garyl.

“Good to see you two,” said Flio. “Have you been good? Not giving your mother any trouble?”

“I’d never!” Elinàsze said, cheerfully taking Flio’s hand.

“I’ve been good,” Garyl said, grinning and leaning his head back on his entwined hands. “I’ve been playing with Wyne!”

As he said the name, Wyne dashed up to the door, a step behind the others. “Dada’s back!” she said, jumping into Flio’s arms and wrapping her arms around the back of his neck. She nuzzled him affectionately.

“No fair!” Elinàsze objected, pouting. “Wyne’s keeping papa to

herself!"

Flio looked around at the three children and smirked. "When we had Elinàsze and Garyl," he said, turning to Rys, "Mister Ghozal told us that half-demon, half-human kids grow up fast, but I never imagined they'd get *this* big in just a month!"

"Me neither," Rys said, smirking back. "It was quite the shock! All those baby clothes I knitted turned out to be completely useless!" Despite her words, she had a big smile on her face.

"Still, watching them grow up so quick and healthy has been a real joy." Flio patted Elinàsze and Garyl on the head, Wyne still dangling from his neck.

As he roughed up Elinàsze's hair, he could see a brilliant white jewel through her bangs. She had had this jewel on her forehead since her birth. Hiya had said this was a sign that sometimes appeared on children born with the blessing of the goddess. It was very rare, though, and they had never before seen an instance of it in actuality. Still, if having the gem on her forehead ever put Elinàsze in danger, they would have to think about hiding it with magic.

While he was thinking about magic and blessings, the impulse struck Flio to check on his children's statuses. He cast Identify, and a window popped up above both Garyl's and Elinàsze's heads. Stealth mode was set on, so only Flio could see them.

Elinàsze (Child)

Lv: 0

Strength: 1

Defense: 1

Speed: 1

Magic: 3

HP: 3

Skills: None

Garyl (Child)

Lv: 0

Strength: 5

Defense: 3

Speed: 5

Magic: 1

HP: 3

Skills: None

Flio let out a sigh of relief. *Their abilities seem normal for small children*, he thought. *They're growing up so fast, but it looks like they didn't end up with any weird powers like I did.* He nodded, satisfied.

“Okay, let’s go inside, everyone!”

They all went in together. Rys nuzzled up close to Flio, Elinàsze clung to his arm, and Wyne was still hanging down from his neck. Garyl walked normally. All of them were smiling—Flio as carefree as ever.

Chapter 3: Capriccio for the Horsey

The Dark One Yuigarde sat on his throne. For some time now, he had been pursuing his brutal campaign against Zanzibar's rebellion. It had left him in rather high spirits. Ever since the fiasco with Klyrode Castle, he would brood in the throne room, making faces like he had swallowed a bug. As Yorminyt and Hugi-Mugi waited on him, they could only regard his sudden change with unease.

"Hey, Phufun," Yuigarde grunted. "Is Calsi'im not here?"

"M-Master!" Phufun took a nervous step forward, pressing her glasses against the ridge of her nose. "Lord Calsi'im is busy making preparations for an event meant to test the fighting strength of the Dark Army's newest members—"

"Oh, is he? I see, I see!" Yuigarde interrupted, laughing and waving his hand to dismiss the explanation.

"A-Ah!" Phufun blinked, startled by how reasonable Yuigarde was being. "Yes, Master. Thank you for understanding." She had expected him to say something like "Whaddaya mean he didn't come when I called for him?!" and slug her a few times to take out his frustration. In fact, she had preemptively taken off her glasses so that they wouldn't be broken when she was hit.

"Hm?" said Yuigarde. "Something up, Phufun?"

"Eh?! N-No, Master! Not at all!"

"Hmph. All right then." Yuigarde shot Phufun a dubious glance before turning his attention back to Sleip, who was kneeling in front of him. "Hey, Sleip," he said, still grinning cheerfully. "How's it coming with that Klyrode army stronghold I ordered you to attack?"

Sleip tensed up at the Dark One's words. *He's making a fool of me*, he thought. *How dare he speak to me like that after rejecting my requests for supplies?!*

Sleip had every reason to be angry. His forces were encamped opposite the position the Klyrode army regarded as their most important stronghold. It was under the protection of MacTaulo, the greatest commander of the Klyrode army, and his elite forces. Even Sleip, a member of the Infernal Four, could not overcome them easily.

And yet despite that, the Dark One Yuigarde had ordered Phufun to have all new supplies sent to his own forces for the fight against Zanzibar. None had been spared for Sleip and his army. It was the same situation with the soldiers—the forces under Yuigarde's direct

command were being given priority. No matter how much he begged, Sleip was being given nothing but scraps.

Sleip was at a loss for words. What was he expected to *do* in this situation?!

Suddenly, a soldier burst into the throne room. "Dark One Yuigarde!" he said. "I apologize for interrupting!"

"What's up?" said Yuigarde. "Something you gotta tell me?"

"Yes, Dark One. I have an urgent message from Sleip's forces."

"What?" Sleip whipped his head around. "From my outpost?"

"Sir," the soldier said, "MacTaulo led the Klyrode army in an all-out attack at daybreak. Our outpost has fallen."

"Wh-What?!" Sleip was stunned. He gritted his teeth and tightly squeezed his hand into a fist. *Blast and damnation!* he thought. *If only I hadn't been caught up in all these useless meetings! If I had been there, I could have stopped this!*

Yuigarde's good mood soured immediately. Sleip had rarely seen him more upset. "What's that?" he said. "The outpost fell? Tch. Pathetic." He fixed Sleip with a hostile glare. "You hear that, Sleip?! Your *elite forces* are just *pathetic*. They fell just 'cause the Klyrode army attacked? I think you might be past your time, old man."

Slowly, Sleip took to his feet. "Perhaps so," he said. He bowed once and made to exit the throne room.

"Sssleip, wait!"

Yorminyt ran after him, but Sleip just turned to her, bowed his head, and said, "Thanks for everything." And then, he left.

Yuigarde watched Sleip go, grumbling and clicking his tongue. "This is what happens when you put senile old men in charge of an outpost," he said. "I gotta get a breath of fresh air..." He stood up. "Hey, Phufun! I'm gonna finish off Zanzibar, and then I'll go take back the outpost! I can handle everything myself! Watch me! Gah ha ha ha ha!" He strode off towards the hallway leading away from the back of the throne room.

"Y-Yes, Master!" said Phufun, chasing after him. "I'll have the army ready at once!"

"Five minutes!" Yuigarde told her. "Get it done in five minutes and no more. Got it?!"

"Yes, Master Yuigarde!"

Yuigarde and Phufun vanished down the hallway, leaving a deeply irritated Yorminyt behind in the throne room. "*Get a breath of fresh air*, he sssays. Thiss isss the problem with having an idiot in charge of the Dark Army..." She rushed out the throne room after Sleip. Hugi-Mugi followed along behind her.

Hugi-Mugi seemed worried. "Yorminyt," they said. "Is Sleip all right, yes? Yes, will he be all right?"

Yorminyt didn't respond. Wordlessly, she continued down the hallway. *Sssleip*, she thought. *We have alwaysss been companionsss, have we not? Pleassse...do not do sssomething rash...*

She came to Sleip's chambers and opened the doors, but Sleip was nowhere to be found. On his desk was the Demon Ring that Sleip had worn for all those many years—the symbol of his oath of fealty to the Dark One. For him to part with that ring could only mean one thing: he had left the Dark Army.

"Sssleip..." Yorminyt picked up the discarded ring and sighed deeply.

And so Sleip, the longest-serving member of the Infernal Four, left the Dark Citadel.

◇Days Later, in a Forest◇

That...was the worst mistake of my life. Sleip tried for all he was worth to pull his bloodied body to its feet, but it wouldn't budge. He had taken more damage than he had realized.

That day, Sleip had finally worked up the resolve to quit the Dark Army. "Well!" he'd said. "Let's see what's next for this old body of mine!" He'd set out with no destination, wandering the wilderness in the form of a horse. But while he was trotting through a forest he'd come upon, he misplaced a step and went tumbling down a cliff.

Normally Sleip would never make such an error, but he had been lost in his thoughts over everything that had befallen him: Yuigarde's reprimand, his own mistake, every failed stratagem he had tried in his battle with MacTaulo... His mind was elsewhere, and he had completely failed to note the presence of a cliff. The fall had taken him completely off guard. And while he was tumbling through the air, he took a hit from a large tree branch. He was wounded, and had broken several bones.

No! I have to get up! He tried and tried to make his body move, but it just wouldn't listen. And then he heard the growls of magic beasts. He looked around, and he saw them drawing towards him from a nearby thicket—psychobears.

They must be attracted to the scent of my blood, he thought. Once again, he tried to stand up, but just like before, it was useless. *Who would have thought that I, who stormed so many battlefields as a member of the Infernal Four, would meet my end here, like this...* He closed his eyes.

"Lord Flio! Like, over here!" Suddenly, he heard a woman's voice.

Wh-Who is that?! Sleip's eyes shot open. There was a man standing between him and the psychobears. The man held out his arm. A magic circle appeared, and all five psychobears collapsed to the ground at

once. *Was that spell...Gravitation?!* Still in his horse form, Sleip watched as one psychobear after another was crushed flat. It must have been the doing of the man's spell.

When the psychobears were taken care of, a young woman popped up and ran over to Sleip. "Oh! Oh, good. The horsey's totally still alive!" She hugged Sleip's equine head and rubbed her cheeks against him, tears streaming down her face.

The man who had defeated the psychobears turned and walked over to Sleip. *This man...* Sleip thought. *What did the girl call him...? "Flio"?*

"Byleri," the man said, "would you step aside for a moment?"

"Oh! Like, totally, Lord Flio!" The woman called Byleri stepped back, letting Flio take her place.

Flio knelt down in front of Sleip's face and touched him on the head. He knit his brow. For a second, it looked like he was about to say something, but he stopped himself. He ran his hand down Sleip's body. "It's not just the one injury," he said. "He has a number of broken bones too. I'm gonna try a healing spell."

Power flowed into Flio's hand, and a magic circle appeared at his fingertips, while many more magic circles appeared here and there on Sleip's body. They precisely covered every part of his body that was hurt, including every broken bone. Sleip's eyes went wide. He could feel the pain subsiding. *Healing magic like this...and with no incantation! Who in the hells is this man?!*

Sleip's wounds were even worse than he had realized. If he had received treatment from Phufun's laboratory—the best healers in the entire Dark Army—it would have taken them weeks to fully heal him, even making full use of incantations. But Flio was casting his spells wordlessly, and his wounds were already almost completely better.

Flio dismissed the magic circles and once again ran his hand along Sleip's body. "It looks like that did the trick," he said. "His wounds are gone, but we should still let him rest for a while." He looked up at Byleri, who had been making worried faces at Sleip from behind him for some time. "Byleri, do you mind bringing us some water from the wagon? I think he might need some."

"Like, right away! I'll be back in a second!" Byleri waved cheerfully and ran off. Squinting in her direction, Sleip could see another psychobear loading the ones Flio had killed onto a wagon. "Like, excuse me, Sybe!" she said, pushing her way past it and into the vehicle.

Flio watched as Byleri entered the wagon and then leaned forward to whisper in Sleip's ear. "You don't have to respond if you don't want to," he said, "but I have no intention of pressing you on whether or not you're a demon. Until your body's all healed, you can rest as long

as you like.”

Sleip startled a little internally. *This man noticed I'm a demon, but would harbor me anyway?*

“But,” Flio continued, “I'd really appreciate it if you let Byleri treat you as one of her horses. Oh, Byleri's the girl who just went to get water. She adores horses, you see, and she seems to be particularly taken with you. She was the one who found you at the bottom of a cliff, you know.” He grinned and began imitating Byleri's accent. “*Lord Flio! There's, like, totally a hurt little horsey down there!*” Sleip listened attentively.

“Lord Flio! Sorry to, like, keep you waiting! I got th-th-th-th-the water?!” Byleri tripped over a rock as she ran with the big bucket of water and stumbled, staggering back and forth. Somehow, just barely, she managed to save herself. “Aha ha! I'm, like, totally fine!” she said. “I brought water for you, horsey!” Byleri giggled with embarrassment at her blunder as she stood in front of Sleip and gave him a big grin.

Sleip felt a bit embarrassed, being looked at head-on like that. He shook his head. *W-Well, I suppose I might as well stick around, at least until my injuries are better. I owe this girl my life, after all...*

◇Later Still, in the Pasture by Flio's House◇

In front of Flio's house was a fence-enclosed pasture with a large two-story barn in one corner where Byleri cared for her horses. Byleri had loved horses since she was a little girl. In fact, it had been her affinity with horses more than any skill as an archer that had earned her her knighthood when she had served in the Klyrode army.

Since quitting the army and coming to live at Flio's house, she had been raising horses and horselike magic beasts Flio caught and lending them out to merchants to pull their wagons. Since Flio had opened the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, they'd been using this pasture to tend to the horses Greanyl and the other former Silent Listeners used as the company's supply and transportation team.

Sleip stood among the other horses. Since coming here, he had not once taken his humanoid form.

“Horsey!” Sleip could hear Byleri's voice. He looked up, and saw Byleri running towards him from the direction of Flio's house. “Hi, horsey! Like, how are you do— Wah!” Somehow, she managed to trip on the completely empty road.

A-Gain?! Sleip mentally *tsked* in irritation as he galloped over to help Byleri. He caught her by the collar with his teeth before she hit the ground and pulled her back to her feet.

“Tee hee hee...” Byleri blushed, giggling with embarrassment. “You, like, keep saving me, don't you, horsey?”

This girl! Sleip thought. *I wish she'd stop giving me frights like that!*

Sleip tossed Byleri onto his back. “Wah!” she cried, grinning as she settled on to ride. Sleip was an enormous horse, and she patted him gently on the neck as she looked around from her high vantage point. He was far too big, in fact, to be fitted with a saddle or a stirrup, but Byleri seemed perfectly comfortable. She was excellent at handling horses and perfectly capable of riding them without such implements. On horseback, she looked like a completely different person from the girl who had just taken a spill on absolutely nothing.

“Has your injury, like, gotten better?” Byleri asked, watching Sleip’s healthy gait with a forlorn expression. “I guess it’s about time to, like, send you back to the wild.” She was holding on to Sleip’s neck. She clearly didn’t want him to go.

Hm. Sleip turned to look back at her. She sat up and gazed at him with big sad eyes. *To think I would have such a sweet girl looking after me in my old age,* he thought. *And after the Dark One Yuigarde told me I was no longer necessary...* Sleip pressed his snout against Byleri, nuzzling her cheeks.

“Wah ha ha?! Are you... Are you, like, saying you wanna stay here? That... That would make me so happy!” Byleri gave him a big hug.

I have nowhere else to go, do I? Sleip pondered, again pressing his head against the girl. *Perhaps it would not be so bad to spend the rest of my life in this girl’s care.*

Byleri held Sleip close and nuzzled her cheeks against his. “Thank you, horsey! Like, we’re totally gonna get along great! But... I guess I gotta, like, give you a name, huh... I hadn’t thought of one ‘cause I thought you’d be going back to the wilds...” She stared at Sleip’s face, deep in thought.

And then, without warning, a woman came up from behind. “How about ‘Sleip?’” she suggested.

“Huh?” Byleri asked. “Sleip?”

The woman walked up next to the pair. “Yes,” she said. “I believe the horse would appreciate that name.”

What? She knows my name? Who is this woman?! Sleip turned to look at the newcomer and stared in surprise. *Whahuh?!* In front of him, grinning and holding a child in each arm, was Rys. *What is the lupine Fenrys doing here?!*

Before Rys had become Flio’s wife, she had served in the Dark Army under the name Fenrys. She was the demon who came closest to equaling the Infernal Four in strength. There was hardly anyone there who hadn’t heard of her, and Sleip was no exception. Rys, too, was very familiar with the many battlefield achievements of Sleip, the longest-serving member of the Infernal Four. She recognized not only his humanoid form, but both his centaur-like form and his horse form

as well.

Sleip hurriedly faked disinterest and looked the other way.

"That's the name of someone I knew before meeting my lord husband—someone from the Dark Army," Rys continued. "A dashing lichsteed soldier by the name of Sleip. I think it's an appropriate name for such a magnificent horse. Don't you?" She leaned in close to Sleip's head, which was turned determinedly in the other direction. "Although the Sleip I knew would never be this much of a sweetheart!" She cackled fiendishly. Despite being a horse, Sleip was starting to sweat under Rys's piercing gaze.

Rys sent Sleip a telepathic message. "*I thought I sensed something strange,*" she said. "*What are you doing flirting like girls in a place like this, Old Man Sleip?*"

"*I-I am nothing but an old demon horse,*" Sleip responded. "*I-I am not the Sleip you once knew. Please, don't tell anyone...*"

"*Hmm?*" Rys seemed to be considering it. "*Well, I suppose. Byleri is quite fond of you, so I'll keep quiet if you insist, Old Man Sleip.*"

"*I-I am just an old demon horse...*" Sleip said. "*But...thank you.*"

"Um... Lady Rys?" Byleri said, looking between Rys and Sleip, puzzled. "Why are you glaring at the horsey?" Byleri had no magic power whatsoever. She would have never guessed that Rys and Sleip were having a telepathic conversation in front of her.

"Oh, don't mind me," Rys said. "It's nothing." She smiled at Byleri and gave Sleip a friendly pat on the back. "I think this horsey likes the name 'Sleip' too, Byleri."

"Yeah! I totally think so too!" Byleri gave Sleip another hug. "It's nice to meet you, Mister Sleip!" Sleip nodded.

Rys regarded the pair fondly. "By the way, Byleri," she said. "I was hoping to show Elinàsze and Garyl the other horses..."

"Oh!" said Byleri. "Like, totally!" She darted off for the stables.

Sleip came up to Rys. "Well, Fenrys, is it!" he said. With Byleri gone, he had no reason to refrain from using words.

"I go by 'Rys' now, Old Man Sleip."

"I see. Rys, I have to ask... Whose children are those in your arms?"

"Oh, mine and my lord husband's, of course!" Rys answered, smiling happily.

"Wh-What?!" Sleip's eyes went wide. "Rys, hold on a moment! Our lupine empress, who always boasted she was second to no man, who delighted in bloodshed more than anyone... *You've had children?!*"

At this, Rys's wolf tail materialized at the base of her tailbone. With whiplike speed, it snapped in place in front of Sleip's neck, hard as steel. "Old man, if you *insist* on bringing up the past..." She was

grinning, but her aura had welled up to a vortex of black energy.

"I-I see!" Sleip blurted out. "I will take care."

"Of course you will," Rys said. "This is for both of our sakes, you understand." Gradually, her smile returned to normal. But Elinàsze, spooked by the black vortex, looked like she was about to cry. "Oh, my!" Rys said. "I'm sorry, Elinàsze. I'm sorry, Garyl. Everything's all right." She shushed them and patted them on the heads a little too urgently.

Sleip watched Rys attend to her children from the sidelines.

Imagine, Rys...a mother! Doting on children like that... Truly, we live in strange times.

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

Yuigarde grumbled and muttered angrily on his throne as Calsi'im of the Infernal Four spoke on, desperately pleading with his master. "P-Please, O Dark One! It *has* been some time, yes, but I assure you that we *will* find Sleip. You must ask him to return to his position in the Infernal Four!"

Yuigarde spat, loudly. "Who cares? The son of a bitch up and left the Dark Citadel, didn't he? Why *should* I invite him back if he won't listen to orders?!"

"B-But! The Infernal lichsteed Sleip is almost as influential a name as the Dark One among the horse demons! If rumors spread that Lord Sleip has turned his back on the Dark Army, it is certain to cause unrest among their number!"

"Hah! I don't give a damn!"

"What?!"

"If some wimps are hung up on a senile old man, who needs 'em!" Yuigarde bellowed. "They're just dragging my army down! If they wanna leave, let them! And maybe let's chase them a little for good measure!" Yuigarde laughed uproariously. "And anyway," he continued, "thanks to your plan, we've got an endless supply of new recruits! Just pick one of them to replace the dodderer."

With that, Yuigarde strode out of the throne room, laughing the whole time. His minion Phufun followed after. During the whole time Calsi'im and Yuigarde had been speaking, she had not once so much as opened her mouth.

Calsi'im watched agape as they left. "How terrible," he said. "I fear my plan may have gone awry!"

Not long ago, Calsi'im had defended the Dark Citadel from Zanzibar's rebel army. When the Dark One offered him a reward, he asked to be promoted to the vacant seat in the Infernal Four. As a result, rumors began spreading among demonkind that the Dark One Yuigarde selects soldiers for promotion based solely on results—that

he was a Dark One who was not concerned about status or standing. Beginning with a devil named Belianna—a member of the same kin as the rebel leader Yuigarde—an endless string of demons affiliated with the rebels abandoned Zanzibar to throw their support behind the Dark One Yuigarde.

All of this had transpired as Calsi'im had planned. Everything had gone perfectly, except for one point. The success had gone to Yuigarde's head. With all of the demons flocking to his banner, he was more than willing to leave Sleip, the old hero, to abandon their cause.

"Surely Lord Gholl would have understood the gravity of losing Lord Sleip. Lord Gholl would *surely* have heeded my council! He always admitted when Lady Uliminas was correct, even when she castigated him with the most cruel invective..." Calsi'im sighed. "Ahh, nothing ever goes quite right, does it...?"

The skeleton slumped his shoulders and trod on out of the throne room.

◇Houghtow City—Houghtow College of Magic◇

One day, Flio paid a visit to the Houghtow College of Magic. He stepped in the front gate to see Belano standing by the entrance to the school building, trying to signal him with both hands. "Lord Flio! Lord Flio!" she called out.

Flio waved and walked over to where Belano was trying to flag him down. "Belano," he said, "aren't you supposed to be teaching class?"

"Oh," she said, smiling meekly. "No, I'm free right now..." She led him inside and opened a door near the entrance. Flio saw a sign reading *Administrative Office*. "Um..." Belano said. "Excuse me... Mister Taclyde? Lord Flio is here..."

"Oh! Thank you, Miss Belano!" The man sitting at the desk inside the room—Taclyde—stood up rather quickly and went to meet Flio and Belano at the door. "You must be Mister Flio, the proprietor of the Fli-o'-Rys general store! I'm Taclyde, the administrator for the Houghtow College of Magic." He shifted awkwardly. "Ah, I'm terribly sorry. I know this is important business, and the principal promised me over and over that he would be here, but...well, it seems he slipped out when I took my eye off him. I swear, that man..."

Flio smirked as he watched Taclyde peer out the window. "That's quite all right," he said. "Today I'm only here to talk. I hope I'm not interrupting anything." He held out his hand.

Taclyde took Flio's hand, a long-suffering smile on his face. "Thank you so much for your understanding," he said.



Flio stepped into the reception area in the administrative office. Belano, whose classes had ended for the day, sat down next to him, and Taclyde took a seat across from Flio.

Taclyde listened intently to Flio's proposal. "In other words," he said after Flio had concluded, "you wish to open a branch of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store on campus as a school store?"

Flio nodded. He gave Taclyde one of his characteristic easygoing smiles and said, "Belano told me that even though you teach night classes aimed at adults, there isn't a school store or a cafeteria on campus. It sounds like it's a lot of trouble for the students and the faculty alike. I thought I might be able to help you out a bit, as a merchant operating out of Houghtow City. Only if you agree, of course."

Taclyde folded his arms and inclined his head. "Hmm..." he said, pondering. "Well, I can't deny that it would be a real lifesaver for the college, but... Are you really willing to do this, Mister Flio?"

"I'm not sure I understand. What do you mean?"

"Well, you see," Taclyde began, "our school was established to support the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode by unearthing those with hidden aptitude for magic in regions outside the capital. We're only a provincial college, you understand. We don't have many students. I can't imagine you'll make much of a profit..." He scratched the back of his head, embarrassed.

Flio just kept smiling, as carefree as ever. "Oh, that's no problem at all."

"It isn't?" Taclyde blinked in surprise.

"I myself have learned a lot from the College of Magic," Flio said. "Honestly, I owe you people a lot. So if I can be of use to your institution in any way, I would consider that simply returning the favor."

Taclyde could only stare. "Has anyone ever told you that you're quite the smooth talker, Mister Flio?"

"Not to my face," Flio said, smirking wryly. "But I am aware."

"I see, I see! Well, you smooth-talking devil, if you insist, I suppose I *have* to accept your offer! I'll let the principal know later." Taclyde offered Flio his hand, and Flio shook it gladly. "I hope this is the beginning of a long association."

"I hope so too, Mister Taclyde," Flio said. Belano watched the two work their magic with a smile.

The next day, they received permission from the principal of the College of Magic, and set to work opening a branch store on campus.



Calsi'im hurried through the underground passageway, looking

over the papers in his hands. “Hm, hm! That takes care of that! And now, we move on to...”

Ever since Sleip had left the Dark Citadel, Calsi'im's volume of work had continually increased. Most of it was little more than chores, not at all befitting a member of the Infernal Four. After all, he had been the one to suggest the Dark One Yuigarde find a way to bring Sleip back—a suggestion that was roundly rejected.

The day after Sleip left, every single one of his subordinates in the Dark Citadel vanished as well, their Demon Rings tossed carelessly in a heap near the throne room. The Demon Ring was the symbol of fealty to the Dark One. To return it was a statement that one was leaving the Dark Army. When Yuigarde heard of this, he told his minion Phufun, “This is all Calsi'im's fault! He must have said something! Make him do busywork for a while. I don't care if you gotta make up chores for him!”

Calsi'im, however, worked on as he was told, not issuing a single word of complaint. “I may have been too proud of my strategy!” he told himself as he looked over the papers. “I got carried away because of all the new recruits and said something out of turn. I'm *sure* this is punishment for that.”

He walked on, and eventually made his way to a door decorated with a sign, declaring it to be *Phufun's Laboratory*. He reached out and knocked on the door. “Excuse me!” he said. “It's me, Calsi'im!”

“Lord Calsi'im!” said Coqueshtti. “Please, come in.” The little mad scientist Coqueshtti was one of Phufun's subordinates. She worked in the laboratory researching ways to strengthen demons as well as healing injured members of the Dark Army.

“Excuse me, Little Miss,” Calsi'im said as he entered.

“Welcome, welcome,” Coqueshtti said. “You're here about the magic doll you left in our care, I assume?”

“Indeed I am! I heard that you had something to tell me!”

Coqueshtti removed a cloth that was covering something in one of the corners of the laboratory. Underneath, Calsi'im could see the shape of the magic doll he'd discovered in a pile of rubbish. “Oh my!” He ran up to it, crying out happily as he bobbed his head. “You've gotten her so clean! I see you managed to fix her broken arm too. And is that new clothing you've made? Excellent work indeed!” Calsi'im gently stroked the doll's head with his bony hands.

The magic doll was shaped like an extremely petite woman. It was the perfect height for wizened old Calsi'im to lean over and pet. “Little Miss,” Calsi'im said, his voice full of excitement, “you've been a tremendous help. But...does she work?”

“Well, that is the crux of the matter, I suppose, I suppose,” Coqueshtti said, folding her arms and lowering her head. “We just

can't get it to turn on!"

"You can't? What do you mean?"

"I don't know what's wrong!" Coqueshtti said. "I reconnected the damaged internal magic cords, I did, I did. I even replaced the magic gems! In theory it *should* be functional, but, well...but, well... Perhaps the magic doll's life force has simply run out." She shook her head.

"I see, I see..." Calsi'im closed his eyes and swept the immobile doll into his arms, carrying it princess style.

"What are you going to do with that piece of garbage, may I ask, may I ask?"

Calsi'im turned to look at the mad scientist. "Oh, you know," he said. "I mean, you got her all prettied up and all. I thought it might be nice to place her somewhere in my chambers as a decoration. Thank you so much for your help, Little Miss."

Coqueshtti cocked her head as he left. "Garbage as a decoration? How peculiar, how peculiar! Why would he do such a thing?"

◇Dark Citadel Second Floor—Calsi'im's Chambers◇

As one of the Infernal Four, Calsi'im's status afforded him a grand suite on the second floor of the Dark Citadel. He lived here alone. A number of skeletons were assigned to him as subordinates, but he had refused any help, insisting that he could look after himself.

"Let me see..." he said, placing the doll on a chair by the bed. "How about here? She could see out the window from this chair. It might help her not get lonely when I'm not around!" He reached out and began to stroke the doll's head. "I had hoped that you might help me with my work, and that we could pass the time enjoying tea together..." he said softly. "But you've done your fair share of hard work, haven't you? You may live the rest of your life in peace."

Calsi'im left the doll and went over to the desk at the end of the room. "Now, let's finish off this paperwork." He sat down and began to read.

Hours and hours passed before he finished. "Goodness gracious! I somehow managed to get it done!" he said, stretching himself out as far as he could without getting up. In front of him was the mountain of completed papers. "Now all I need to do is take this to young Phufun! But first...perhaps I will take a break."

Calsi'im sighed and took to his feet, when—*clunk!*—someone placed a teacup on his desk. "Ah! Much obliged!" he said, and sat down again, picking up the teacup with both hands and slowly bringing it to his bony mouth. He slurped noisily, then sighed with happiness. "Delicious! I can't remember ever tasting better tea!"

"Would you like another cup?"

"Certainly! Another, if you please!" Calsi'im said, reflexively

turning to look at his interlocutor. It was the doll—she was standing next to him. Her eyes were open, but her expression was a perfect blank. She was looking at Calsi'im. "Ahh, I see..." he said. "You figured out how to move, did you?"

"Yes, Master," she said. "I am awake, and I seem to be moving." She bowed deeply.

"Oh, there's no need to call me that," said Calsi'im. "'Calsi'im' will do just fine."

"It will? Then I will address you as you instruct me, Calsi'im."

"Good, good!" Calsi'im nodded, satisfied. "Hmm...but we need to give you a name, don't we?" Calsi'im gave it some thought. Eventually, his eyes settled on the teacup she had brought him. "Tea... Hmm... You *do* make such delicious tea. Well then, how about I call you 'Tia'?"

He pet the doll, Tia, gently on her head. After a little while, she stopped moving again. But Calsi'im, whose cheekbones had developed a bit of blush, didn't notice one bit.

◇Flio's House, Several Days Later◇

What in the devil?! Sleip couldn't believe the scene before his eyes. It was morning, and he had gone to the front of the stable to greet Byleri when she came to bring the horses food. But what he saw was a far greater number of horses than he had anticipated outside the ranch.

Flio's house was located outside the walls of Houghtow City, and so, as a precaution, Flio would set up a barrier around the area every night before bed. The other horses were gathered just outside the barrier's edge. One of them noticed Sleip. "Ah! Lord Sleip!" he said.

The other horses began to talk at once. "Lord Sleip!"

"It has been far too long, sir!"

"How I have longed to meet you!"

Sleip hurried over to the horses, stopping right in front of the barrier. He took a good look at the horse who had first noticed him. "You're...Dalc Horst?!"

"Yes, Lord Sleip. I am."

"You... You're alive! When I heard that the outpost had fallen, I feared the worst..."

"I am so sorry, my lord. It was under my watch that we lost the position to MacTaULO..."

"No, no, do not blame yourself. With no reinforcements coming, that outpost was doomed. I am just glad to see you alive." Sleip whinnied happily and nodded his head.

Dalc Horst returned to his humanoid form as he spoke, as did the other horses behind him, including Sleip. "Actually," he said, "in

truth, we owe that to MacTaulo.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“My lord...” Dalc Horst started. “Do you remember the incident with the Wolf of Justice?”

“Of course I do. He and that gang of wolf-mask-wearing warriors broke through our blockade!”

“MacTaulo said,” Dalc Horst continued, slipping into an impression of MacTaulo’s voice, “‘I promised that Wolf of Justice fellow I would not cause any unnecessary deaths. If you surrender, you may leave with your lives.’”

“So, MacTaulo let everyone escape?” Sleip asked.

“Yes. To my shame, I accepted MacTaulo’s offer. We agreed to disarm, and he let us leave, just like he said.”

“I see...” Now that he understood the gist of the situation, Sleip felt a wave of relief wash over him. *The Wolf of Justice and MacTaulo...* he thought, reassessing the two men in his mind. *What decent fellows!*

The Wolf of Justice had captured the fast cavalry teams he had sent to cut off the Klyrode supply lines and returned them unharmed to Sleip’s headquarters with a handwritten letter that said: “We wish for peace.” MacTaulo, too, had made it a point to capture his soldiers without loss of life and to release them unharmed. And now, after crushing their outpost with an all-out attack, he had allowed Dalc Horst to leave with his life intact. Sleip closed his eyes in thought.

“We went back to the Dark Citadel,” Dalc Horst said, “but we had heard you were expelled from the Dark Army, my lord. That was the final straw. Why should we ally ourselves with the Dark One if he sends away you, Lord Sleip, the most meritorious soldier in the entire damned army? So we left and made our way here.” He bent down on one knee. “Lord Sleip, may we not take up residence here with you? We, your twenty-one handpicked guards, solemnly swear that we will happily serve as draft horses.”

“We swear it!” the other twenty called out as one.

Sleip looked over his former soldiers, a look of distress on his face. “A-Ah! Well, you see... The thing is... The question of whether or not you may stay here is not *exactly* at my discretion.” He scratched the back of his head.

Dalc Horst looked up. “Then why do we not take our petition to her ladyship?”

“Her ladyship?” Sleip asked, perplexed. “There aren’t any highborn ladies around—” He turned his head only to see Byleri standing right behind him. Sybe, in its psychobear form, was with her, pulling a cartful of feed for the horses. She regarded Sleip with narrowed eyes.

“So...” she started. “You’re, like, a demihuman?”

“Ngh?!” Sleip started in surprise. He had resolved to live with Byleri as no more than an ordinary horse, but in the joy of his reunion with Dalc Horst and his other soldiers, he had thoughtlessly returned to his humanoid form to speak. Byleri had arrived at the worst moment. “A-Ah!” he said. “W-Well, you see... The thing is...” He faltered, while Byleri stared in mute confusion.



It didn’t take Flio long to realize that something was wrong. He showed up at once, dispelled the barrier, and invited the horse demons into his house to hear what they had to say.

“And so,” he said by way of summary, “you, Mister Dalc Horst, and your team, would like to live in our pasture alongside Mister Sleip?”

“We would.” Dalc Horst nodded. The rest of his team followed suit. “We can see to our own lodgings. We have lots of experience with engineering from our time in the Dark Army!” He thumped his chest.

“Oh, there’s no need at all to trouble yourself about that,” Flio said, and a magic circle appeared at his fingertips. Suddenly, tree after tree in the forest was felled by magic and flew up into the air. They arranged themselves and slotted into place, coming to land alongside the stables. Before their eyes, another set of grand stables had assembled itself.

Once again, Sleip could not believe his eyes. “My word!” he cried. “I knew you were a deft hand at magic, Lord Flio, but I had no idea...!”

Dalc Horst cocked his head, clearly considering something. “Dalc Horst,” Sleip asked, “what is the matter?”

“Oh, nothing,” he said. “It’s probably just my imagination. But when I see this Lord Flio from behind...I can’t help but feel like I recognize him from somewhere.”

“You recognize him?”

“Maybe...” Dalc Horst didn’t look at all certain. He was trying as hard as he could to remember.

Suddenly, a wolf came bounding in from the nearby forest. She was a great beast with pure white fur, and she was carrying an animal she must have hunted down. She came up to Flio. “Has something happened, my lord husband?” she asked.

“Hello, Rys!” Flio said. “We just got some new lodgers in the pasture, so I made some quick additions to the stables.”

“Oh, I see.” Still in her wolf form, she nuzzled up against Flio.

Dalc Horst, who had been watching from behind, began to tremble. “The Wolf of Justice...” he said. “I’m certain of it. Lord Flio is

the Wolf of Justice! His body's the same! And that lupine demon... There can be no mistake."

"Wh-What?!" Sleip balked. *Come to think of it, Dalc Horst was captured by the Wolf of Justice. I heard from the reports that a lupine demon was with him too. I see... So that was Rys and Lord Flio...*

Sleip watched as Flio put the finishing touches on the new stables, unsure of what to do with this knowledge.



Sleip and his twenty-one handpicked elite guard, including Dalc Horst, moved into the pasture surrounding Flio's home. The first floor of the stable Flio had built for them was made to accommodate horses, but the second and third floors were ordinary human-style rooms for them to use in their humanoid forms. They had also begun working at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, pulling wagons and the like. Together with Uliminas's old intelligence network from the Dark Army, the Silent Listeners—who were now in charge of Fli-o'-Rys's supply lines—they traveled all over the land.

Sometimes, at Flio's request, they would take human forms and drive off a contingent of the Dark Army that had been attacking towns, or slay dangerous magic beasts, or keep the roads clear of bandits, or other similar tasks. At Dalc Horst's request, Flio made twenty-one masks for Dalc Horst and his subordinates to wear during these missions.

The Wolf of Justice had utterly defeated them. Indeed, Dalc Horst had come to take pride in the work he did for his former enemy. He enjoyed donning the wolf mask on Flio's missions. After all, Flio could have easily killed them if he had wanted to, but he instead chose to spare their lives out of a desire for peace. The gesture had touched Dalc Horst's heart.



"Comrades! It is time for the day's training!"

The other horse demons brayed as one in response to Dalc Horst's words. In their horse forms, they began to run around the pasture at tremendous speeds with Dalc Horst himself at the front.

Sleip watched the scene from the window of the manager's office on the first floor of the new stable. His arms were folded—he was in his human form—and there was a smile on his face. "It is good to see that they have adapted to life here," he said.

"Like, totally, right?" said Byleri, nodding enthusiastically. "They look like they're enjoying themselves! But like, they were so totally shocked to learn they'd be living with Mister Ghozal and Miss

Uliminas!” She chuckled at the memory. “Like, it’s kinda funny looking back, y’know?”

“Ser Byleri, please... I would rather not discuss that incident.” Sleip grimaced. “I’m afraid I made every bit of a fool of myself as the others! But...” He hesitated. “S-Ser Byleri... That is... How long are you planning on staying in my chambers? It’s been quite some days since you returned to the main house.”

Byleri grinned. “Oh,” she said, “I’ve been thinking, like, maybe I’ll just move in here?”

“What?!” Sleip was taken aback. Panicking, he swung around to face Byleri directly.

Byleri’s smile only grew bigger. “Like, I *looove* horsies, y’know?” she said. “And you’re, like, such an amazing horsey, Mister Sleip! A-And...” She took one of his hands in hers, holding it close. She was still smiling happily, but her face had grown quite red. “You’re, like, a demihuman and stuff...and your human form is, like, uh, y’know. Nice.”

Her words sent him into complete discombobulation. “Wh-What are you saying, Byleri?!” he squeaked. “Look at me! I am an old man! It would not be appropriate for me and a precious young human girl like yourself to...to...”

But Byleri smiled up at him. “Like, y’know,” she said, “there’s lots of stuff I haven’t tried before. But I’ll do my best. So, like...please?” She looked serious.

“I... Ser Byleri...” Sleip choked out. “What...exactly do you mean by that?”

“Um, like...I’ve never lived with a man before, y’know? I’ve never really cooked before...and I totally have no idea how to do laundry. Or cleaning. I mean, I’m, like, totally a pro at cleaning the stables, though! And... And... Y’know...” Byleri started to mumble. “I haven’t, like...in bed...um...like... Yeah... Y’know?”

Sleip stared at her. *H-How can anyone be this adorable?!* he thought. He was in love. Old demon though he was, his heart had been moved.

◇Less than an Hour Later, beside the Window◇

“Very well,” Sleip said. “Do as you wish.”

“Like, thank you so much, Mister Sleip!” said Byleri. The two embraced.



Outside the window, Hiya and Damalynas were listening in on their conversation. The two were pressed right up to the side of the window, so they could see everything that was happening in the room.

“Finally,” Hiya murmured quietly. “They’ve become a couple.”

Damalynas nodded. “Do you think they’re gonna do it tonight?”

“I will make sure of it.” Hiya nodded back, resolute. “As her companion in pursuit of knowledge of lovemaking, I consider it my duty.”

“Yeah,” Damalynas whispered. “We gotta make sure, don’t we?”

The two shared a look and gave each other a slight nod. And then, with a *creeeak* and a *clack*, the window was pulled shut. Hiya and Damalynas shared another look. “Your Divinity!” Damalynas said. “Could they be—?!”

“I cannot deny the possibility,” Hiya said. “They may be...even as we speak...”

The two perverts shared yet another look, more serious than the last, and crept up right next to the window, each summoning a small magic circle to get a good look at what was happening inside the room.

Chapter 4: Babies in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s Living Room◇

After dinner, Wyne and Garyl were playing together in the living room. “Aha ha!” Wyne laughed, spreading her arms wide. “Come and get me, Gare-Gare!”

“All right, sis,” Garyl said. “Here I come!”

Although they had been born only a month prior, Garyl and Elinàsze were as developed as a human child would typically be at five years old. It seemed half-human, half-lupine children grew up tremendously fast. Wyne doted on the two like they were her real little brother and sister.

Today, yet again, Garyl had challenged Wyne to a grappling match after dinner. “Today’s the day!” he said. “I’ll get you this time, sis!” Garyl charged at her. Grinning, she pushed him back with both arms. “Aha ha ha ha! You’re *feisty*, Gare-Gare!” she said. “C’mon!”

Although she was still young, Wyne had been the strongest soldier in the legion of dragons in the Dark Army. She was holding back considerably, of course, but she wasn’t about to lose to her baby brother. Even so, Garyl kept challenging her, day after day after day.

“You’re *never* gonna beat Big Sis Wyne, Garyl,” Elinàsze said. She was sitting on Flio’s lap, watching her siblings go at it. She had grown more and more attached to her father the bigger she got—a real daddy’s girl. She stuck to Flio whenever she could and spent just about every second of every day in his company.

“Don’t be so hard on your brother, Elinàsze,” Flio said, smiling down at her. “Wyne is very strong, you know?” Inwardly, he was breathing a sigh of relief. *I’m so glad they’re normal children...*

When Flio had reached Level 2 in this world, he had obtained outlandish, phenomenal powers. He was well aware that it had caused him to get involved in all sorts of trouble. *I really hope my children don’t end up with powers like I did...*

Periodically, Flio would check the children’s statuses, just to make sure there was nothing out of the ordinary. He very much wanted them to have a normal childhood and not get wrapped up in anything too wild.

Ghozal and Hiya were aware of Flio’s feelings, so they kept an eye

on Elinàsze and Garyl as well. So far, they had seen no sign of any unusual powers. Elinàsze was born with a gem in the middle of her forehead, but it didn't seem particularly poised to cause any trouble.

"I really thought Mister Flio's kids would have *some* sort of special ability..." said Ghozal.

"Yes," said Hiya. "I did as well..."

Flio smiled. "I'd really rather they didn't have to deal with anything like that," he said. He looked at Elinàsze sitting in his lap. *Her jewel doesn't seem to have any kind of effect for the time being*, he thought, glancing at the bright jewel. *It would be nice if nothing ever came of it...*

Meanwhile, Garyl had gotten utterly trounced by Wyne. He lay on the floor, arms and legs spread wide, exhausted. "Dang it!" he said. "I'm still no match for you!" He gasped for breath, but on his face was a big grin.

Wyne looked quite satisfied with the match. "You're getting stronger every day, Gare-Gare," she said. "Not bad!"

"Am I?" Garyl pursed his lips. "I can't tell at all."

"Here! Let's see for ourselves!" Wyne raised her arm and began to chant. A magic circle appeared, and from it came a number of skeletons. There were ten of them, each less than a foot tall. The skeletons started scampering around Garyl.

"Wow!" Elinàsze exclaimed, jumping down from Flio's lap and running up to get a closer look. "What are those?" Her eyes were shining with curiosity.

"Okay, Gare-Gare," said Wyne. "Let's see who's stronger: you, or these skeletons!"

"But I lost to these things last time!" Garyl protested.

"You'll do fine!" Wyne said. "This time, you'll win!"

"You think so? Okay... I'll try it." Garyl faced off against Wyne's skeletons.



Just then...

“Waaah?!” Elinàsze caught her foot on a rug decorating the floor and tripped.

“Elinàsze! Watch out!” Garyl ran to catch her, but instead, he lost his balance as well. The two of them tumbled to the floor.

There was a series of sickening cracks.

“Wh-What?! What happened?!” Garyl sprung to his feet and looked down to see the remains of the skeletons he had been facing a minute ago. Every last one had been completely smashed to bits.

“Huh?” said Garyl.

“What?” said Elinàsze.

“What’s wrong, you two?” Flio asked, rushing to their side.

Elinàsze looked puzzled. “I...heard some weird voice in my head.”

“Me too...” said Garyl. “It said...‘Level Up’? Or something?” He looked every bit as confused as his sister.

“Huh?” Flio blinked. *No...* Dreading what he would find, Flio cast Identify. He looked at the windows.

Elinàsze (Child)

Lv: 2

Strength: ∞

Defense: ∞

Speed: ∞

Magic: ∞

HP: ∞

Skills: ∞

*Restrictions applied due to minor status.

Garyl (Child)

Lv: 2

Strength: ∞

Defense: ∞

Speed: ∞

Magic: ∞

HP: ∞

Skills: ∞

*Restrictions applied due to minor status.

No way... Flio’s pupils shrank. He covered his face with his right hand.

Yes, it was at Level 2 that Flio had obtained his cheat powers—the blessing of Transcendence. Now the same thing had happened to his children.



Later, Flio's family all gathered in the living room, along with Ghozal, Uliminas, Hiya, and Damalynas.

Ghozal smirked. "You know, really, I had expected Mister Flio's kids to have *some* kind of power, but *this* is something else!"

"Well..." Flio began, cocking his head and frowning at Ghozal's words. "I had been hoping this wouldn't happen. I wanted them to have a normal childhood..."

But Rys smiled. "Truly?" she said. "For my part, I am happy. My children will be brave and strong, like my lord husband."

"Me too!" said Wyne, bouncing happily in the air. "Me too, me too!"

"Hmm..." Flio looked unconvinced.

"Exalted One," Hiya said, "if that is your concern, then you have no cause for worry."

"I don't?"

"You do not." Hiya reached their arms out towards Garyl and Elinàsze. "The children of the Exalted One have the phrase 'Restrictions applied due to minor status' appended to their abilities. They will not achieve the omnipotent powers of the Exalted One until they reach their fifteenth year of age and become adults."

"Even so," Flio objected, "just look at the amount of magic they have..."

Flio had a good reason to be concerned. Restricted or not, Garyl and Elinàsze's powers had bloomed all at once. Their bodies were overflowing with magic energy.

Damalynas extended her arm and focused, and then laughed bitterly. "Well, would you look at that?" she said. "It took me centuries and centuries to build up the magic power I have now, and those twerps surpassed me in the blink of an eye. What a world." Damalynas, the Grand Magus of Midnight, had once been feared as a dark mage with enough power to threaten the entire world and had been sealed away underneath Klyrode Castle. "Well, anyway, they have a ton of magic power, but it looks like their ability to cast spells is restricted. We'll have to keep a close eye on them as they grow up."

"Hrm," Ghozal added. "Children with that much magic power... Someone might try to use them for their own ends."

Uliminas nodded and folded her arms. "There's the devil Zanzibar's whole upurrising against the Dark Meown, to begin with..." she said. "I can't purrdict what might happen with that. We should be careful."

Elinàsze looked up at Flio with big worried eyes. "Papa..." she said. "Is something bad going to happen...?"

Flio held her tight in his arms, giving her his usual easygoing smile. “Everything’s all right, Elinàsze,” Flio said. “If anything happens, your papa will be here to protect you.” He gently patted her head.

Elinàsze smiled and hugged Flio back. “Thank you, papa. I love you.”

Garyl sprung to his feet. “Don’t worry, Elinàsze!” he said. “I’ll be here too! I’m gonna get so strong that I can even protect Big Sis Wyne!” He charged playfully at Wyne, swinging his arms wildly.

“Aha ha ha!” Wyne laughed. “Look at you! Protect *me*, hu—Waaaah!” Wyne braced herself to catch Garyl like usual, but this time he was moving much faster than before. He caught her in the belly with one of his fists, and Wyne went flying. She went splat against the wall.

“W-Wyne!” Rys cried out.

Ghozal looked stunned. “Come on...” he said. “I thought their power was restricted! He’s *that* strong?!”

Garyl froze up. He had no idea what had just happened. “I...sent big sis flying?” he said. “Wh-What? How?”

Those children are definitely gonna need looking after, Flio thought. He promised himself that he would protect them no matter what.

◇In the Sky, above a Forest◇

Three djinn flew through the night sky: Maglion, the djinn who mastered the magic of the Dark World, Powlion, the djinn who mastered the power of the Dark World, and Speelion, the djinn who mastered the speed of the Dark World. They had been called here by Valentine of the Twelve Evil Generals.

Right now they were hanging in the air, staring at something out of view. “Did you two feel that as well?” asked Maglion, their long black hair blowing in the wind.

“Yes...” Powlion nodded. They were wearing a black robe that covered their whole body—it looked like some kind of vestment—but even so it was obvious that their musculature was immense. “A tremendous release of magic power...”

“Indeed,” Speelion said, grinning widely. They were slender-bodied. “If we could capture someone with as much magic power as that, we could replenish the magic General Valentine spent to summon us, and even conjure the Grand Passage!”

“I can sense several entities with great magic power in our vicinity...” Maglion said. “We should capture them all, and present them to General Valentine.”

“Yes...” Powlion said. “I agree. General Valentine would be pleased.”

“Indeed,” Speelion said. “Then we should hurry!”

The three nodded, and changed their course to fly towards the surge of magic they felt—Houghtow City.

◇That Morning, in a Forest near Houghtow City◇

“Ser Byleri! Hold on tight!” Sleip ran like the wind in his horse form with Byleri clinging to his back.

“Like, yeah! Totally!” Byleri grinned. The two had recently adopted the routine of going for long rides first thing in the morning. Behind them, Dalc Horst and the rest of Sleip’s elite personal guard ran after them. Sleip was two orders of magnitude older than the other horses, but it seemed like they were only barely keeping up.

Dalc Horst watched Sleip run happily. *He’s so much more lively than when he was stuck in that outpost on the Dark One Yuigarde’s orders,* he thought. *We owe so much to Lady Byleri...*

Sleip had been so much happier since moving in with Byleri that it was almost unreal. It was like the pluck and vigor of his youth had returned to him. His powerful legs were no match for the rest of them.

“Today, let us make for the canyon,” he said. “What say you, Ser Byleri?”

“Okay!” she said. “Like, I’ll go anywhere with you!”

“Wait,” said one of the demon horses running behind Dalc Horst. “All the way to the canyon?!”

“Th-That’s a bit much for a morning run!” said another.

Dalc Horst looked back at the pair. “Quit your bellyaching!” he said. “Look at how fired up our old Lord Sleip is! Do you wanna fall behind him?”

“I-I suppose not...”

“Now that you mention it...” They nodded, resolved to try to keep up.

The herd flew on through the forest, when Sleip let out a surprised noise. A masculine figure was blocking the path. Sleip came to a stop a safe distance away. Dalc Horst and the rest fanned out. Sleip had not given them any orders, but each one of them understood perfectly well what to do. They moved in formation to surround them.

“Indeed,” the figure said. “I thought I sensed some beings with respectable magic power, and decided to come bother you for a while. It seemed like it might be entertaining.” They paid no heed to the demon horses surrounding them, and stepped towards Sleip. “I am Speelion, the djinn who has mastered the speed of the Dark World. A djinn in service to General Valentine of the Twelve Evil Generals.”

A djinn from the Dark World! Sleip started to sweat, but he didn’t take his eyes off of Speelion. *And the Twelve Evil Generals are the direct subordinates of the goddess Sterner, Mistress of Evil! What would her cat’s-*

paws be doing in a place like this?!

He responded curtly. "Sleip."

"Oh, Sleip, is it? Correct me if I'm wrong, but wasn't that the name of one of the Infernal Four of this world's Dark Army? Then that would make *you*..." Their pale-white, narrow face broke into a grin.

Sleip turned only his upper body back into a human, taking a centaur form. *This is bad*, he thought. *Other than Dalc Horst, the rest lack experience. And...* He turned to look at Byleri, who was sitting on his back.

She was shaking. "Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Who is this person?!" she stammered. "I'm, like, kinda totally freaked out..."

I cannot fight with Ser Byleri on my back... Cold sweat ran down Sleip's brow.

"Indeed," Speelion said. "That young lady riding on your back doesn't seem to have much in the way of magic. I have no use for her. But if she goes and tells someone about me, it might cause us difficulties later. I believe I will kill her here." They tossed off the vestments they'd been wearing and lowered their unnaturally slender body down on all fours. "Oh, *what* now?" they mocked, noticing Byleri's apprehension. "I'll send Sleip after you soon, so you won't be lonely. Although you might not recognize him once I've wrung out all of his magic!"

Sleip stared at Speelion. *Absolutely shameless*, he thought. And then he shouted out in a loud voice, "Retreat! Return to the pasture! Lord Flio must be told of this!" He grabbed Byleri and tossed her behind him to Dalc Horst. "Dalc Horst! I leave Ser Byleri in your care."

"Fweh?!" Byleri exclaimed. "S-Sleip!" She reached out towards him as she sailed through the air.

Dalc Horst caught her in his mouth and tossed her onto his back. "Retreat!" he echoed. "Lord Sleip's orders! To the pasture!"

"Yes, sir!" the demon horses answered as one, and turned to run full speed in the opposite direction.

Dalc Horst took the rear of the herd. Byleri, who was riding on his back, stretched out as far as her arms would go, reaching for Sleip. "Nooo!" she cried, pulling at Dalc Horst's mane. "Like, go back! Don't leave Sleip on his own!"

"Ow, ow, ow! L-Lady Byleri! Stop! That hurts!"

"Like, I won't until you turn back!" She pulled harder.

"W-We have to return to the pasture first! Ow! Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!" The two kept arguing as they sped into the distance.

"Indeed," Speelion said. "Did you think I would politely allow those horses to get away?"

"Of course not," Sleip snapped. He charged at the djinn. "But I

won't give you the chance!"

But Speelion kicked off the ground, moving much faster than Sleip. In a second, they were upon him, aiming a kick at his back. "Indeed, who would have thought that Sir Sleip of the Dark Army's Infernal Four would be this slow!"

"Ngh!" For a moment it looked like Sleip was about to collapse, but he dug his hooves in and held firm.

"Oh? That wasn't enough to finish you, I see. Well, then..." Speelion raised their right hand.

"F-Fweh!" Suddenly, Byleri was in Speelion's grip! They held her up, hand closing around her throat.

"What?! S-Ser Byleri was ahead with Dalc Horst!" Sleip's eyes looked fearful.

"Indeed," said Speelion. "Did you think they were fast enough to escape me? While I was attacking you, I also took the opportunity to chase after them and bring back the young lady." Speelion held Byleri up higher, above their own head.

"F-Fweh... S-Sleip..." Byleri managed, screwing up her face. "Run! I'll, like, totally handle this!" She grabbed hold of Speelion's arm, and bit down on it as hard as she could.

"What?!" shouted Speelion. "What are you trying to do, girl?! O-Ow! Ow, ow, ow!" Speelion hadn't been expecting Byleri to fight back, and was completely caught off guard by her bite. It hurt like hell. "I underestimated you! But no more! Die!" Their fingers dug harder into Byleri's throat.

"Ghh..." she moaned and writhed in pain, but Byleri still had fight in her. She swung her leg and kicked Speelion hard in the face.

"Kn-Know your place, girl!" Speelion said, flexing their arm even harder to crush her windpipe.

But the next instant, Byleri was gone.

"Wh-What?!" Speelion cried. They looked around, only to find Flio standing next to Sleip.

"I thought I felt some kind of weird magic," he said. "And who would you be?" Byleri had already been healed. Flio returned her to Sleip.

"Oh! Ser Byleri!"

"Sleip! Like, I'm so glad you're alive!" She jumped into his arms and hugged him tight, crying tears of joy.

Flio smiled at the couple before turning his attention back to Speelion.

Speelion stared back at the newcomer. "Indeed," they said. "I couldn't sense your presence before you arrived. You took back the girl, and you show no fear of me. Who are you?"

"I'm Flio, proprietor of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store."

“Proprietor of a...*general store*?” Speelion laughed sardonically. “You jest. Do not take me lightly! I am Speelion, the djinn who has mastered the speed of the Dark World! Now, regret your foolishness in death!”

Speelion kicked off the ground and vanished faster than Sleip could see. But as they ran at superhuman speeds through the forest, a look of shock came to their face. “I-Impossible!” Flio was running after them, matching their speed exactly. “N-No! Even in the Dark World, I am the only one who can achieve such speeds!” For the first time that day, Speelion started to sweat.

“T-Take this!” they shouted. A swarm of magic knives appeared around them and flew impossibly fast at Flio.

Flio reached out to dispel Speelion’s magic with his own, but nothing happened. “Huh?” he said as the knives slashed at his body.

Speelion chuckled and stopped running, facing Flio from a short distance away. “You’re pretty fast,” they said, “but it seems you know nothing of the magic of the Dark World.”

“The magic of the Dark World?”

“Indeed. You tried to dispel my Dark Blades, but could not.” They grinned. “Which means the magic of the Dark World will work!” As they spoke, an even greater number of knives appeared. Once again, Flio extended his arm to stop them. “Ha ha ha! Don’t bother! The magic of this world cannot harm me. Now stop struggling and—” *Clink!* A sound like breaking glass rang out from behind them.

“Huh?” Speelion said, a worried look crossing their face. *Clink! Clink! Clink!* They whipped around. The knives they had conjured were vanishing one by one. “N-No...” Their eyes went wide. Before they knew it, they had no weapons left.

“I guess getting hit by your attack made it so I can use the magic of the Dark World,” Flio said as he looked over his status window.

The blessing of the gods, Transcendence, which had activated when Flio hit Level 2, not only boosted his abilities to ridiculous levels but also gave him every magic spell and skill that existed in this world. Among them was the ultimate spell, Epiphany. If he was ever struck by a spell he did not know even a single time, he could use Epiphany to instantly learn every spell of its type. Only one person before him in the history of Klyrode had ever mastered this spell.

Flio himself didn’t know about this spell. He had no idea why he could suddenly use the Dark World’s magic.

“So the magic of this world can’t harm you,” he said. “Does that mean that the magic of the Dark World can?” He pointed at Speelion, and a vast quantity of threads appeared.

“Th-That’s the Dark Spell, Iron Web! How could a human—” Speelion’s eyes went wide. They were shaking. They ran as fast as

they could, trying to get away, but Flio's Iron Web was faster, and Speelion was caught. They couldn't even get a word in edgewise before becoming completely enveloped.

Sleip was stunned. "Well..." he said. "I knew you were extraordinary, Lord Flio, but I had no idea..."

Flio turned around to face the lichsteed. "Oh, no, no," he said, giving his usual easygoing smile. "All I am is the proprietor of a general store!"

◇In the Sky, near Flio's House◇

A feminine figure wearing black vestments floated in the sky, their long hair fluttering in the wind—Maglion, the djinn who had mastered the magic of the Dark World. Before them was Hiya, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness. Hiya's beautiful body was adorned with nothing but a white cloth wrapping. A circular halo shone behind their head.

"You are a djinn of this world, are you not?" asked Maglion.

"And you, I take it, are a djinn of the Dark World," Hiya responded.

The two went silent, and for a while seemed to do nothing but stare each other down as the wind tossed around their hair and clothing.

"I would prefer to avoid a fruitless battle with a fellow djinn," Maglion said. "So I have a proposition. Would you hand over the two humans inside the house?"

"Hm," Hiya replied. "And you would take them away without harming us further."

"I knew you would understand," Maglion said. "Dealings with a fellow djinn are so nice."

"Yes, I *understand* you," said Hiya, "but I refuse." Their narrowed eyes didn't shift in the slightest.

Maglion glared at their adversary. "Oh?" they said. "And here I thought we could come to an agreement. Perhaps you do not understand your situation." They sighed and shook their head, tossing off their outer vestments. Underneath, their outfit was styled with a black and purple pattern. They looked every bit the priest of a dark god. "I am Maglion," they said. "Loyal servant of General Valentine, one of the Twelve Evil Generals. I am the greatest magic user in the Dark World."

Maglion pointed at Hiya. "I perceive that you have command of this world's origin of light and darkness," they said. "However, a djinn of a mid-level world like this one cannot hope to defeat a djinn of a high-level world."

"We shall see," said Hiya. Once again, the two fell silent and

returned to staring each other down. But this time they were doing more than taking the other's measure. To someone watching, it might seem like they were doing nothing, but in fact the two were engaged in an intense magical exchange.

One djinn would cast a spell, and the other would use their own magic to dispel it before casting a spell of their own, which would then be itself countered. The two were casting tens, hundreds, even thousands of spells a second as they faced down.

Minutes passed.

"My, my," said Maglion. "I thought you were nothing more than a mid-level world djinn, but you're quite good, aren't you? I suppose none but a djinn could handle magic as you do."

"You honor me," said Hiya, "is what I would like to say. However, you are holding back, are you not?"

"Oh? Whatever makes you say that?"

"You have restricted yourself to only using the magic of this world," Hiya said, cool and matter-of-fact. "Not once have you drawn upon the Dark World's magic."

"So you noticed," Maglion muttered bitterly, lowering their gaze. "So much for my plan to trick you into thinking we were evenly matched. I was going to let you get confident and then strike you down. Tch." They looked back up at Hiya. "Well, what a pity. I'd love to obliterate you with the magic of the Dark World...but my master General Valentine desires more magic power. Yes, I shall wrap you in a bundle and take you with me. And then I shall do the same to the people in that house. Although, with the spell Iron Web, there's no guarantee any of you will make it back alive."

Maglion grinned fiendishly and raised their right arm skyward. And then, noticing something, they stopped. "Well, well," they said, an expression of undisguised contempt coming over their face. "What were you *thinking*? You...incorporated the psyche of the Grand Magus of Midnight into your mindscape?" They shook their head, giving Hiya a look of pure condescension. "Unbelievable. The trash of the magic world. An *actual* pile of garbage. And you took her into yourself? What is *wrong* with you, mid-level world djinn?"

Maglion extended their arm outward. "I suppose I'll have to annihilate the Grand Magus of Midnight first. If I presented something like *that* to my master, she might have me killed." They began to chant.

Hiya took a step forward. "I have a proposition of my own," they said. "I will let you see for yourself the technique I've developed alongside the Grand Magus of Midnight, whom you hold in such contempt."

"The technique you developed with the Grand Magus of

Midnight?"

"Just so. If you can withstand it, I will do whatever you wish. So I swear."

"Oh? I see..." Maglion nodded. They were intrigued. "I may not have been using the magic of the Dark World," they said, "but you *did* match me spell for spell. I suppose I am *just a tiny bit* interested. Very well. I'll take you up on your offer. Although, no matter what sort of spell you cast, I assure you that it will not work on me." Maglion lowered their hand.

Hiya took a step forward. And then another step.

This djinn... Maglion thought. *Hiya, I believe... What are they doing? Are they going to cast their spell at close range? Do they really believe that such low-level magic will work on me?* Maglion regarded the djinn with an expression of feigned calm, but they were watching Hiya's movements carefully, not letting their guard down for a second. Just in case this spell would actually do something, they wanted to be ready to counter it immediately.

Hiya stepped closer. They were moving casually, not casting any magic. And then, they whispered a spell.

Here it comes! Maglion thought. They readied themselves. And then, behind them, a wall of stone appeared. "Huh? A wall?" Maglion wasn't sure what they had been expecting, but it wasn't that. They were stunned. And then—

Thud!

Hiya's arm reached past Maglion, impacting the wall and pressing Maglion against it with their own body. "They hit...the wall?" Maglion said to themselves, baffled.

They looked from their hand back to Hiya. Their faces were close. "Huh? What?" Maglion was starting to panic.

And then, Hiya kissed them.

Asfdgsh!!~%khfdn!!?*

Maglion had no idea what was happening. Their eyes went wide, and their limbs flailed helplessly.

Yes... Hiya thought. *Djinn know nothing of lovemaking, just as I once did not.* Hiya entwined their tongue with Maglion's, tasting the djinn's saliva. Strange, unknown sensations overwhelmed Maglion's body—the fruits of Hiya and Damalynas's unfailing dedication to their training.

Maglion, their face bright red, tried their hardest to disentangle themselves from Hiya, but they couldn't resist the waves of pleasure flooding their senses with every movement of Hiya's skillful tongue. They couldn't cast their magic. They could hardly even move.

And then, Hiya pulled away.

"P-Pwahh..." Maglion stared upward, blushing, their mouth

opening and closing like they were gasping for breath. Hiya wrapped their arms around them and pulled them in.

"There's more," Hiya said. "We've only just started." And they drew in for a second kiss.

Hours later, Maglion lay in Hiya's embrace, utterly spent. Their face was still flushed crimson and their eyes were out of focus. "I..." they began, their voice trancelike and faraway, "I've never..."

"Now you have seen the techniques I developed with your hated Grand Magus of Midnight," Hiya said. "What do you make of them?"

"That... That was incredible..." Maglion sleepily gazed up at Hiya. "I... I don't think I can live without you any longer..."

"In which case," Hiya said, smiling down at them, "will you join us in our training?"

Maglion's face lit up at those words. Hiya took Maglion in their arms, and the two vanished. Their destination, of course, was Hiya's mindscape.

◇Meanwhile, in a Hallway in Flio's House◇

"Mama? What's Mx. Hiya doing in the sky?"

"Are they fighting?"

Elinàsze and Garyl clamored in front of the window, but their mother Rys was blocking their view, preventing them from seeing what was happening. "W-Well!" she said. "You see... I suppose you could say they *fought*, or something like that. I'm afraid you're a little too young to be watching this..." She forced a smile on her face as she did her absolute best to hide the entire window from view.

"They did?" Elinàsze asked. "I don't really get it, but I wanna see..."

"Me too!" said Garyl. "I wanna see how Mx. Hiya fights!"

That Hiya! Rys thought as the children tried their best to see the view she was blocking. *Doing something like that in the middle of the sky... It's too early for the children to be learning about those sorts of things!*

◇Blossom's Farm◇

In front of Flio's house was the pasture run by Byleri. And across from that, spreading out as far as the eye could see, was a vast swath of farmland. This was Blossom's farm. It had once been a small vegetable garden behind the house, but Blossom had worked and worked until it had grown to be more than twice as large as Byleri's pasture.

"Sorry to make you help with the farmwork, Mister Ghozal,"

Blossom said.

“Don’t worry about it!” said Ghozal, laughing. “I’m always glad to help!” He was carrying two baskets of freshly harvested vegetables on his shoulders down to the road where the cart was waiting.

The goblins Hokh’hokton and Maunty watched him work, their bodies shaking violently. “M-M-My good Maunty,” Hokh’hokton said, “do you suppose it’s all right for the former Dark One to carry the vegetables we harvested?”

“I-I-I-I don’t... I don’t know...” said Maunty. “I don’t know *what* to do...”

Maunty and Hokh’hokton had once been in the Dark Army, back when Gholl had been Dark One. Back then, they would not have been permitted to so much as look upon him. Yet here he was, smiling cheerfully as he carried baskets of vegetables.

The two shook as they worked, but they still kept filling basket after basket. “I-I-I suppose if he’s carrying them...”

“Y-Y-Yes... We need to keep filling the baskets. No question.”

Wholly ignorant of the goblins’ trepid conversation, Ghozal kept on carrying the baskets with a smile on his face.

“Sir Ghozal! This way!” Balirossa and Sybe were waiting at the cart, filling it up with the great big baskets. Ghozal’s grin grew bigger when he saw them.

Hrm... Ghozal thought. *Balirossa is beautiful even when she’s doing farm work.*

Just as Ghozal thought that, something enormous appeared behind her. “Wh-What?” Balirossa said, looking up nervously as the thing’s shadow fell over her. “What is that?”

It was a heavily muscular figure wearing a black vestment. “Yes...” they said. “Woman. You will be the first offering to General Valentine. Be grateful for the honor.”

“Eeeek!” Balirossa screamed. Shielding her head, she dropped to a low crouch in fear. The djinn bellowed and swung their fist...but the impact never came.

Slowly, Balirossa looked up. Ghozal was in front of her. He had covered her with his body and taken the attack straight to his back. “Ser Balirossa,” he said, “are you hurt?”

“Blocked?” said the mysterious attacker. “Well, no matter. You seem like you have plenty of magic power, yourself. I’ll take you down instead and offer *you* to General Valentine!” They raised their arm again, preparing to strike.

“Hrm...” Ghozal said. “You keep bringing up this General Valentine. That wouldn’t be Valentine of the Dark World’s Twelve Evil Generals, would it?” He gave Balirossa a shove back in the direction of the farm.

“S-Sir Ghozal!” she said, looking at him with worry in her eyes. He gave her a confident smile over his shoulder.

“Oh?” the djinn said, seemingly impressed. “You know of General Valentine? I am Powlion, the djinn who has mastered the power of the Dark World, loyal servant of the general.”

Ghozal cocked his head. “Strange,” he said. “I severed our ties to the Realm of Evil. Did Yuigarde reestablish contact?”

“Who knows?” Powlion said. “I think Maglion and Speelion said something to that effect, but I don’t care about stuff like that. I’m just here to capture people with magic power and bring them back to General Valentine!” They thumped their fists on their chest like a drum.

“Hrm,” said Ghozal. “Fine. I’ll just beat the living daylights out of you, then.” He cracked his knuckles.

The two glared at each other, faces practically touching, and then...

“Graaah!”

“Haaaah!”

The two swung their fists at once.



It was an incredible sight. Ghozal and Powlion swung their fists for all they were worth. Neither using any magic, they slugged each other with nothing more than pure strength. Powlion was far and away the stronger one, but Ghozal was holding his own, not giving an inch. He took the djinn’s punches full on the body, countering with strikes of his own.

“Y-You! For a human, you’re not bad.” Powlion’s shoulders heaved for breath as they looked at Ghozal.

“Hrm. For a djinn, you’re nothing special.” Ghozal stood up tall.

“Well then,” said Powlion. “Out of respect for your strength, I will face you in this form!” They began to focus their power into their body. “Gwoooooooh!” With a shout, their skin changed color to become red. Their body grew larger and larger, bursting through their vestments and ripping them to shreds. Before long, they were nearly ten times the size they had been before.

“Gwah ha ha ha ha!” Powlion laughed. “Are you surprised, human? This is my true form!” They swung their arms in a great circle. The movement produced so much force that it made the crops in the farm wave as if in a breeze.

“S-Sir Ghozal!” Balirossa watched Ghozal from behind in the field. All she could do was pray.

“Now!” said Powlion, “I’ll finish it with *this*! I hate to use this attack against a human, but I’ll kill you and take your corpse to

General Valentine so that she can suck out all of your magic!"

"Hold on," said Ghozal, holding up his hand. "Just one thing."

"Mm? What is it, human? Are you going to beg for your life?"

"Don't be ridiculous. If I didn't think I could beat you, I would run away. But..." Ghozal folded his arms and looked up at Powlion. "You keep calling me a human. Do you really think a human would have this much power?"

Powlion gave the matter some thought, and then nodded their head. "Well, now that you *mention* it..."

"I'm relieved to see you can understand that much at least,"

Ghozal said. "Well. Anyway. I'm not a human."

"Yes... Then, what are you? A demon?"

"Good," Ghozal said. "You're half right. But I would hate to end this without you knowing who defeated you." Ghozal gathered his own power and grew giant himself, his skin patterned black and blue. He had transformed into a demon. "Hrm..." he said. "It's been a while." This was the form he had taken as the Dark One Gholl.

Ghozal looked over his body to make sure nothing was out of place. There was no sign of the damage he had taken in the exchange of blows earlier.

"What's that supposed to be?" Powlion said, sighing dramatically. "I was wondering how big you were going to get, but you're not even a third my size! What a disappointment!"

"Incredible," Ghozal said, exasperated. "You actually are a big enough idiot to think size is the same as power. Well, come on. Try hitting me." He gestured with his fingers, beckoning Powlion to attack.

"Yooooou!" Powlion bellowed, their body growing redder by the second. "Are you making fun of me?!" Furious, they brought up both arms above their head, fists clenched tight together, and brought them down on Ghozal.

Ghozal held up his right index finger.

When Powlion's arms impacted Ghozal's finger, there was a terrible noise. A whirlwind of smoke rose up, tossing around huge boulders. When it cleared, Ghozal was standing there perfectly calm, as if nothing had happened.

"Ah... Ah... AAAAAH!" Powlion's eyes widened in shock as they stared at their arms—what was left of them, that is. They had been broken off past the elbows. The boulders that had gone flying in the whirlwind earlier—those had been the broken fragments of Powlion's arms. Ghozal had splintered them with only one finger.

Powlion froze up, unable to do anything but stare.

Ghozal cracked his knuckles again. "I didn't introduce myself, did I?" he said. "I'm Ghozal, freeloader at Flio's house. But I used to be

known as the Dark One Gholl!" He struck Powlion with a swift uppercut, sending them flying, their body disintegrating from the jaw as they sailed through the air.

"I-I lost to a freeloadeer!" Powlion wailed in the moments before their body was completely shattered.

Ghozal folded his arms again as he looked over Powlion's scattered boulder-like remains. "Dang it," he said. "Maybe I should have led by saying I was the Dark One Gholl. That djinn went out thinking I was just some freeloader..." He sighed and turned back into his human form.

Balirossa jumped into his arms. "Sir Ghozal! Thank goodness... I'm so happy you're safe..."

Ghozal held her tight. "Hrm..." he said. "I'm glad you were worried about me, but I'm not about to be defeated by some random djinn."

"I know, I know..." Balirossa cried as she nodded her head.

Suddenly, Ghozal could hear Flio's voice in his head. "*Mister Ghozal, is everything okay?*"

"Hrm? Mister Flio?"

"*I thought I sensed a djinn near you...*"

"Yeah, everything's fine. I just took care of it."

"*I see. Actually, I had a run-in with a djinn myself just a little while ago.*"

"You did?"

"*I did,*" Flio said. "*I think we should compare notes about these djinn. Can we meet in the living room?*"

"Understood. I'll teleport right there." Still holding Balirossa, Ghozal cast Teleportation and vanished from the spot.

◇Flio's Living Room◇

Ghozal and Balirossa appeared in Flio's living room to find Rys, Sleip, Byleri, Hiya, Damalynas, Uliminas, Dalc Horst, and Flio himself waiting for them. "Hrm," Ghozal said. "Sorry for the wait." He grinned affably at the crowd, but Flio and the rest stood stiff, staring at the two of them with curious expressions. "Hrm? What is it? Do I have something on my face?"

Uliminas shot up from her chair and walked over to where the pair were standing, her shoulders rising and falling, a folded paper fan clasped tight in her hand. "So," she said. "Ghozal? Balirossa?"

"Hrm."

"Yes?"

"Meowt exactly were mew two *doing* in that state?" Uliminas pointed the tip of her paper fan towards them.

"This state?" Ghozal and Balirossa echoed. They lowered their

gaze to look down at the state of their own bodies.

Ghozal was stark naked.

His clothes had been torn to shreds when he'd transformed into his Dark One form. After all, his demonic body was more than twice the size of his human form. It had been so long since he'd last assumed the form that Ghozal had forgotten to worry about his clothes.

Balirossa's clothing, meanwhile, was in tatters. When Powlion was shattered, his parts came down from the sky as clumps of rock. Balirossa ran for Ghozal as fast as she could, but the rocks falling from the sky had ripped her blouse open, exposing her breasts for the world to see.

Neither of them had noticed their state of undress.

"U-Uliminas!" Ghozal protested. "You've got it wrong! Ser Balirossa and I have *never* done anything like that!"

"R-R-Right!" said Balirossa. "Just so, Sir Ghozal! I would never *dream* of engaging in f-fornication!" The two pleaded for all they were worth, Ghozal hastily covering up his groin and Balirossa covering her chest.

"*Purrfidy!* Mew *liars!*" Uliminas hollered, striking them both square on the head with her fan.



Later on, thanks to Blossom's timely arrival and hastily delivered testimony, Ghozal and Balirossa were cleared of wrongdoing. When they shared their accounts, Ghozal, who was well-informed about the history between the Dark Army and the Realm of Evil, explained the situation to the best of his knowledge. It was clear that they had been attacked by three djinn underlings of Valentine of the Twelve Evil Generals. But they had no clear idea why people from the Dark World—the world which Ghozal had severed ties with when he had been Dark One—were here now, or why they sought to abduct the members of Flio's household with vast magic power.

They decided to send Greanyl and her Silent Listeners—the former spy corps of the Dark Army—to gather as much information about this event as possible. Meanwhile, Flio created a new magic item for everyone to carry with them, which he called Security Gems. If they were ever to be attacked again by enemies from the Realm of Evil, they were to cast the gem to the ground, breaking it. Upon doing so, the gem would sound the alarm, sending telepathic signals to every member of Flio's household telling them who had broken their gem, and where.

In addition, Flio cast Concealment on Garyl and Elinàsze. They were still too young to be able to hide their magic power well. This

way, hopefully, General Valentine's minions wouldn't notice their power and come after it.

◇Nighttime, Several Days Later◇

Flio sat on the bed, watching Garyl and Elinàsze sleep. Rys sat beside him. "We haven't heard anything more from the Realm of Evil," she said, smiling. "It's all thanks to your precautions, my lord husband."

Flio smiled back at his wife. "I just hope that's the last we hear of them," he said, patting his children gently on their heads.

"There's nothing to worry about!" Rys said, striking a martial arts pose with a playful smirk. "Whether it's the Realm of Evil or the Dark Army... I, Rys, will strike them down if they ever dare come after us!"

Flio wrapped his arms around his wife. "I'm glad you're looking out for us," he said, "but don't get yourself hurt, okay?"

"Okay..." Rys said, nodding meekly.

The two embraced, and slowly brought their lips together in a sweet kiss.

◇A Mansion, High in the Mountains◇

"What in evil's name is going ooon?!" Valentine wailed. "Riliangiu was *supposed* to be summoning the Grand Passage, but now I can't even *contact* her. Speelion's been silent, Maglion won't respond, and even *Powlion* seems to have entirely *vanished*!" She flopped back on the bed in the room she was staying at in one of Zanzibar's hidden bases—a mansion high in the mountains.

"*Now* what do I do? I used way too much magic summoning those three djinn..." Valentine held her hands out in front of her. The very tips of her fingers had become hazy and wavering, a symptom of magic depletion. She had lost so much magic that her physical form had started to grow unstable.

The inhabitants of the Dark World have a tremendous amount of magic power in their bodies. Usually it's no problem for them to maintain their forms for decades at a time, but Valentine had used almost all of her body's magic power to summon her three djinn to this world. She didn't even have enough remaining power to return home.

"I *promised*, though," she sighed. "I can't just throw those demons to the wolves. Oh well." She sat up and walked over to the window, opened it, and jumped out. "I'll go find somewhere with lots of humans to devour," she said. "If I eat two or three thousand, I might be able to recover enough of my strength."

Valentine headed out into the forest, searching for signs of

humanity.

Chapter 5: Flio Goes to the Mountains

◇The Alips Mountains◇

Flio and his family were at the Alips Mountains, far to the north of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. Rys looked around at the field of white snow piled high, a look of awe on her face. “So *this* is snow!” she marveled. Rys had abandoned her usual dress for cold weather gear, but she still looked pretty cute.

“Is this your first time seeing snow, Rys?” Flio asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I’d heard rumors, but this is my first time seeing it with my own eyes.” Those same eyes were shining with delight as she took in the view.

“Wow!” Elinàsze exclaimed. “Snow!” She was clinging to Flio’s arm, beaming widely.

“Look, Big Sis Wyne!” said Garyl. “Snow!”

“Look, Gare-Gare!” said Wyne. “Snow!” The two grinned at each other and jumped towards one of the snowbanks. Sybe, as a horned rabbit, was one step behind them, snuffling happily. The three leapt into the snow with their arms outstretched. Later, they laughed and laughed about the body-shaped holes they left in the mounds of snow.

Flio’s household had come to the mountains on vacation, on the invitation of the Maiden Queen. He had received a letter from Her Majesty which read: “Dear Lord Flio, I have been overjoyed of late to hear of the birth of your children. If it should please you, I would like to offer an invitation to use the Klyrode Castle Resort Spa, located in the Alips Mountains. Please enjoy the winter mountains to your hearts’ content.”

Flio had accepted the invitation gladly. He had just now arrived by Teleportation. Everyone was there, except for Blossom, who was still busy with farm work, and Belano, who had a class to teach.

“I’ll never understand you humans,” Ghozal said, folding his arms as he glanced in the direction of the mountains. “What, exactly, is fun about playing in the snow in this cold weather?”

Dotting the mountains before them was a great number of lodges, and on the slopes in front of the buildings, there were humans and demihumans sliding down the snow on thin boards strapped to their feet—a game known as *skiing*. Others were coming down the

mountains in wooden constructs known as *sleds* or pelting each other with snowballs. “What do you think, Uliminas?” Ghozal asked, turning to the hellcat beside him.

But Uliminas didn’t respond. Or rather, she couldn’t. From her head to her feet she was covered in layer after layer of clothing to such an absurd degree that she looked, more than anything, like a snowman. Her face, too, was wrapped in several scarves. It sounded like she was trying to say something, but her voice was too muffled to make out.

“Uliminas...” Ghozal said. “Could it be...you don’t handle the cold well?” Uliminas gave a small nod. Uliminas was a hellcat, after all. Cold was one of her biggest weaknesses.

“I wanna go home and curl up under a warm blanket...” she mumbled to herself.

“Can you even walk in all those clothes?” Ghozal marveled. “Well, let’s try to get you to this ‘resort spa’ that the Maiden Queen mentioned as soon as we can.” He gave Uliminas a friendly smack on the shoulder, but the force caused her to lose her balance! She rolled and rolled on ahead, picking up speed as she dropped down the slope.

“Whoa!” said Ghozal. “So *that’s* it! Rolling down the mountain, eh? That looks fun!”

“No, Mister Ghozal!” Flio shouted. “She’s falling!” He flew down the slope after the swiftly rolling Uliminas.



Flio had managed to rescue Uliminas before she came to any harm. Right now, she was sitting next to the fireplace, doing everything she could to warm her frozen body.

“Well whaddya know!” Ghozal said, chuckling, and covered in snow. “That was pretty fun!” He had thought Uliminas rolling down the mountain looked like a grand old time and curled up into a ball so he could roll down the hill himself. Ghozal was an enormous man, so he picked up incredible speed as he rolled down the slope.

The other visitors had watched him streak past in distress and confusion.

“Who is that man...?”

“Is he some kind of weirdo?”

Ghozal had paid them no mind as he rolled and rolled, laughing the whole time.

He’s a little kid, Uliminas thought as she watched by the fire. *He’s just an enormeows little kid.*

“Oh! Uliminas!” Sleip noticed what she was doing and called out to her, a sympathetic smile on his face. “If you’re so cold, perhaps you should take a spell in the bath!” It looked like he and Byleri had just arrived from outside.

Dalc Horst and Greanyl, incidentally, were busy with their shipments and espionage missions and weren’t participating in the trip.

“Bring the bath over here and I’ll get in it,” Uliminas said, not moving an inch from the fireplace.

“This cat...” A very wet Ghozal sighed, shaking his head and picking up Uliminas with one hand.

“Meowr?! Wait! C-Cold! It’s fureezing!”

“You’ll warm up real quick in the bath,” Ghozal said, peeling layer after layer of clothing off her with his free hand. It didn’t seem to occur to him that they were still in the middle of the lobby.

Uliminas flushed red and fought to keep Ghozal from taking off more clothes. “Meowron! Nincompoop! Don’t strip me in front of *everymeown!*”

“You wanna be clothed in the bath?” Ghozal asked.

“That’s not *it!*” Uliminas spat. “I can take off my clothes on my meown!”

“Ha ha ha! Look, don’t worry about it! C’mon! Maybe Ser Balirossa will get in with us!” Ghozal effortlessly blocked Uliminas’s flailing attacks and looked over at Balirossa.

Balirossa turned bright red. “What?” she said, waving her arms in

a flustered panic and raising her voice to a falsetto. "I-I-I don't... I mean..."

"Meaning..." Uliminas said. "That mew were planning to get in with me?" She gave Balirossa a glance.

Balirossa stopped moving. For a second, she seemed to be considering what to do. "Oh!" she said, finally. "I-I-I suppose, if Ser Uliminas were to...to be there..." She was red all the way up to her ears.

The three had been spending a lot of time together ever since the incident the other day with the djinn from the Dark World. Uliminas and Balirossa had had a private conversation, but they were still keeping what they had said a secret, even from Ghozal. Whatever it was, they were getting along a lot better. The three disappeared into the family bath behind the lobby.

"I suspect we won't be able to use the bath for a while," Flio said as he watched them leave, "wouldn't you say so, Mister Sleip?"

"Yes, yes. They'll be busy for hours." The two smirked.

"My lord husband," Rys said as she walked up, "there is another bath, it seems." She showed him the map in the guidebook she had found in a corner of the room.

"Oh! So there is. It looks like there's an open-air bath in addition to the family bath Mister Ghozal and the girls are using." Flio stood up and followed the directions in the guidebook through the hallways until they reached a large open-air bath. It was enclosed by a veranda and a high wall so as to not be visible from the outside.

"It's a very lovely view," Rys said, shivering as she stepped out into the open air, "but it's a little too cold for me..."

"Shall I cast a barrier then?" Flio offered. He held out his hand and a barrier appeared around the veranda, protecting it from the cold. "How's that?"

"This is much better, thank you," Rys said, smiling and nodding. And so their family entered the open-air bath.

"First!" Wyne shouted, tossing off her clothes and leaping into the bath with tremendous force. *Splash!* A plume of spray rose up as Wyne entered the hot water. "Pwaaah!" she exclaimed, reemerging on the surface.

"Me too! Me too!" Garyl ran ahead.

"Garyl, no!" Rys caught him seconds before he reached the bath. "Wyne," she said, "don't do that again. Do you understand me?"

Wyne giggled. "Sorry, mama," she said, lowering her head...but also sticking out her tongue.

Wyne had lost her parents at an early age, and had grown up without anyone to call a family. After Flio and Rys took her in, she became attached to them as if they were her biological parents. Even

when the couple had kids of their own, Wyne was nothing but overjoyed, doting on the children constantly.

Rys, of course, was well aware of all that. “Just as long as we understand each other,” she said, rinsing herself in hot water before entering the tub and sitting down next to her adopted daughter.

Wyne giggled and gave Rys a big hug. “I love you, mama,” she said.

Flio was behind them, watching the scene play out when Elinàsze scampered up. “Papa,” she said, “I’ll wash your back for you.”

Flio smiled. “No, you go ahead and get in the bath,” he said. “Your papa can wash himself, you know.”

“But I *wanna* wash you!” Elinàsze tugged on his arm.

In the end, Elinàsze wore Flio down and dragged him off to the washing area together. She lathered up a washcloth and rubbed it vigorously up and down Flio’s back, chanting, “Scrub! Scrub! Scrub!”

“Dada!” Wyne said. “Let me help!” She got out of the bath and ran over to Flio.

“Oh, Wyne, there’s really no need to—”

“But I *wanna* wash you *too*!”

And so Wyne and Elinàsze both ended up washing Flio’s back together, chanting together, “Scrub! Scrub! Scrub!” Flio couldn’t help but smile.

“I would like to offer to wash your back as well,” Rys said, approaching him with a smile on her face, “but you seem quite occupied.”

“Then I’ll wash daddy’s hair!” declared Garyl.

“H-Hold on!” Flio protested. “Isn’t this going a bit—”

“No, no, let me do it!” Garyl took the bottle of shampoo and lathered a generous helping into Flio’s scalp. It was far too much shampoo, and before long, Flio’s hair was covered in a layer of soapy bubbles. Flio used a magic barrier to keep it from getting in his eyes.

Magic comes in handy at the oddest of times, doesn’t it, Flio thought, grimacing as Garyl roughly worked the shampoo in his hair, heedless of his father’s face disappearing under a mass of bubbles.



After that brief fiasco, Flio and his family settled into a nice long bath, joined by Sleip and Byleri. When they got out, Ghozal, Balirossa, and Uliminas were still in the family bath.

As the three finally vacated the family bath, Hiya materialized behind them. “Hm...” they said, nodding to themselves, “those three are quite adept in the art as well...”



After an early breakfast the following morning, Flio and his companions headed out to ski. The group included two young children—Garyl and Elinàsze—along with Rys and Wyne who were unused to the snow, so they avoided the steepest slopes in favor of the relatively gentle hills closer to the foot of the mountain.

Uliminas stood by the slope, once again wearing layers upon layers. *Why did I come meowt here in the cold again...?*

“Ser Uliminas,” Balirossa said, worried, “it is quite all right for you to stay warm indoors.”

“Well, I mean...” Uliminas said through her chattering teeth. “We came meowll this way. I gotta try it at least *meownce...*”

“What’s up, Uliminas?” Ghozal said, noticing her discomfort. “Are you cold?” Without warning, he swept her off her feet and began dashing up the hill with astonishing speed. “It might be hard to move in the cold like that! Let’s roll down the hill like we did yesterday.” He laughed heartily.

“Hey!” Uliminas cried. “What are mew doing?!”



Garyl’s eyes lit up as he watched Ghozal and Uliminas roll fast down the snowy hill. “Mama!” he said. “I wanna try that!”

“Garyl,” Rys said, “Ghozal and Uliminas are very skilled. If you tried to copy them, you might end up hurting yourself.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry, but you’re not allowed.”

“But mama! Just once! Please? Just once!” Garyl begged.

But Rys held firm. “I said *no*.”

Sleip was watching the mother and her son from nearby, a grim smile on his face as he trudged through the snow. *Never thought I’d see the day*, he thought. *Rys the man-eater, acting like a proper mother. In all my long years, I truly never thought I’d see the day.*

“Sleip! Like, over here!” Byleri cried, waving him over.

Sleip trotted up to find her sitting atop what looked like a small cart. “Hm...” he said. “Byleri, what is that thing?”

“This is a sled!” she said. “I, like, saw it in a shop and thought it might be fun, so I, like, totally rented it!”

“I see, I see. Then, how does one use this sled?”

“Y’know?” Byleri said, sticking out her tongue and blushing in embarrassment, “I, like, don’t actually know myself?”

“Hah...” Sleip looked around and saw a group of children riding on the same contraption. They were taking it to the top of a small hill and sliding down, crying out with delight as they raced every which way. “I think you need to do more than just sit on the thing, Byleri,”

he said.

“Yeah? Like, you think?”

“Here,” he said. “Allow me.” Sleip transformed into his centaur form. An ordinary horse-type demihuman would have had trouble finding footing with their hooves in the snow, but Sleip was a demon. He had the fortitude to walk through the snowbanks.

Sleip took the reins of the sled in hand. “Hold on tight,” he said, quickly darting up a nearby hill.

“Eeek!” Byleri cried as they rocketed through the snow. It was tremendous fun; she had a huge smile on her face as she cried for joy.

Sleip himself couldn’t help but smile, seeing her. *Ah*, he thought as he picked up speed, *I would do almost anything to make that girl happy*. Sleip was an old man, but in all his life, he had never felt so overjoyed. “There you go!” he said, giving her a push down the hill.

“Eeeeeeeek!” Byleri cried again, grinning as she raced down the hill, the sled leaving tracks in straight lines behind her.

Sleip folded his arms as he watched her, satisfied, when he felt someone tugging at his shoulder. “Hm?” he said, turning around to see Hiya and Damalynas. Hiya had a placid smile on their face and a sled in their arms. “What? Don’t tell me you want me to pull your sled too?”

“This, too, is a form of training,” said Hiya.

“Or something like that,” Damalynas added. “Anyway, thanks in advance!” The pair bowed.

Sleip smirked. “I would think you more than capable of ascending the hill on your own,” he said.

“Ah,” said Hiya, “but the sensation of the wind as you pull us, Sir Sleip, is indispensable to our training.”

“Our great and esteemed Byleri looked like she was having a blast!” Damalynas said. “We’d really appreciate it.”

“Fine, fine,” Sleip said. “The two of you together are an absolute nuisance.” Smirking, he dashed up a hill, pulling Hiya and Damalynas in their sled.

“Exceptional!” Hiya cried. “This is everything I hoped it would be.”

“Yahoo!” Damalynas cheered. “Your Divinity, this is great!”

“Indeed. Doing this with you will prove fruitful as training.”

“One hundred percent!” Beaming, Damalynas wrapped her arms tight around Hiya. And then, when they reached the peak of the hill, Sleip gave them a push.

“Excellent!” Hiya declared. “Most excellent indeed!”

“This is the *best*!” The two cried out happily, looking for all the world like small children as their sled flew down the slope.

“Now to give Byleri another turn,” said Sleip, taking a step in her

direction.

“Um,” someone said, “excuse me?”

“Hm?” Sleip turned around to see a child and his father, two people he had never met before, standing before him. He gave them a dubious look. “Yes? Do you need something?”

“Um...” the child said, timidly holding out the reins of his sled.

“Mister? Would you mind pulling my sled too?”

“Huh?!” Sleip exclaimed, his eyes going wide.

“You see,” said the boy’s father, “I would like to pull his sled myself, but I’m not used to snow. I was watching you run up the mountain. You were lightning fast! Would you please? For my son?” He bowed deeply, and the child lowered his head as well.

Just then, Byleri walked up, smiling and dragging along her sled. “Like, there’s no harm in giving them *one* ride, is there?”

“Well, if you say so, Byleri.” Sleip took the child’s sled by the reins.

Suddenly, Uliminas appeared beside him, still dressed up like a snowman. “Okay, okay!” she said. “We’ll do registration over here. If anyone wants a ride, get in line! The centaur will carry meow up in meowrder. Put your meowney into this box!” She was holding a handmade sign she must have put together at some point, reading “Registration.” Apparently, she was setting up a shop to sell Sleip’s sled rides. A line was already beginning to form.

“Hey! Uliminas!” Sleip protested. “What’s the big idea?”

“Whenever there’s an oppurtunity for purrofit, I’ll be there,” Uliminas said. “Just leave everything to meowrs truly.”

“Wait! No! That’s not what I—”

“Now hurry up and help the furst in line!”

“I, er, I mean...”

Uliminas was persistent, and in the end, Sleip was unable to refuse her demands. He ended up being stuck pulling sleds up the mountain until nightfall.

◇A Restaurant on the Ski Slope◇

Hero Gold-Hair, Tsuya, and Riliangiu sat in a restaurant on a ski slope in the Alips Mountains. It was cold outside, so the three of them were wearing heavy winter clothing.

“My lord, my lady,” Riliangiu said, “I have obtained the soup.” Smiling, she placed a pot full of soup in front of Tsuya and Hero Gold-Hair.

“Ah! Thank you, Riliangiu,” said Hero Gold-Hair.

“You’re always sooo helpful, Miss Riliangiu!” said Tsuya.

Riliangiu was moved by their thanks. *When I worked for the Realm of Evil, they never thanked me for completing a mission; they never so*

much as had a fond word for me! Prince Charming...I mean, my lord Hero Gold-Hair and my lady Tsuya are such wonderful people...

Ever since Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya had found her near the hill and saved her life, Riliangiu had been traveling with them. She had told them she was an amnesiac. "All I know," she had said at the time, "is that when I came to, I was collapsed in a forest..."

"I see..." Hero Gold-Hair had said. "There must be something at work behind our meeting. You should come with us until you regain your memories."

Tsuya agreed. "Let us knooow if you remeeember anything!" she said, smiling. "We'll have all kiiinds of adventures!"

"Hm?" Hero Gold-Hair said, back in the present. "Riliangiu, did you not get soup for yourself?"

"Ah..." she said. "N-No, I don't deserve any, my lord..."

"Don't be so uptight!" he said. "You're one of us!" He handed her his own portion of soup. "Eat this. I'll go get my own."

"But... I..."

"Don't worry about it! You two go ahead and get started, I'll be back in a bit." With a smile on his face, Hero Gold-Hair walked off.

Riliangiu found herself grinning bashfully as she watched him go, her face red. *Ahh, my Prince Charming—Hero Gold-Hair, I mean! I would die for you, my lord...*

"You know," Hero Gold-Hair said to himself, oblivious to Riliangiu's wistful gaze. "I've heard that some of the magic beasts in the forests around here sell for good money. Maybe I'll go set some traps after we're done here..."

◇A Lodge in the Alips Mountains◇

After dinner and a bath back at the Resort Spa, Flio's companions met in the main room of the lodge.

"Of all the miserable days..." Sleip said, sighing as he lay on a big sofa.

"Sleip? Like, are you okay?" Byleri said, massaging his lower back with a worried look on her face. Byleri had weak arms and no idea how to give proper massages. By all rights it shouldn't have helped at all, but Sleip looked very happy to be receiving it.

"Aaah," he said. "With your massage, Byleri, my fatigue will be gone in no time."

Byleri smiled. "Like, totally! I'll do my best!" she said and started using more force.

"I had no idea snow could be so much fun! It's a winter wonderland out there!" Blossom said with a happy smile. She had

been late to get back. "I've only ever lived in warm places. This was my first time even *seeing* snow, much less playing in it! I only wish Maunty and Hokh'hokton were here..."

Belano was sitting stiffly next to her, almost as though she were frozen solid. "Huh?" Flio said, looking over curiously. "Belano, what's wrong?" But the girl wasn't moving an inch.

"Oh, don't worry, Lord Flio," Blossom said. "Belano's just sore from all the running around she did."

"Still?" Flio asked, surprised. Belano had only arrived a few hours ago, and she hadn't played for very long.

Slowly, Belano turned her head to look at Flio. And then, even more slowly, she nodded. Her movements were stiff. It seemed like she was terribly sore.

Flio walked over, placed a hand on Belano's back, and cast a healing spell. "We have one more day here, so make sure you rest up," he said. Belano smiled and nodded. The magic must have worked. She was visibly moving more smoothly.

"Would you heal old Sleip as well, my lord husband?" Rys said. "I'm afraid Byleri's power won't be enough."

"No, no," Sleip said. "Byleri's hands are working wonders." He pointed to his chest. "Especially here."

"Well," Rys said, hiding her grin behind her fingertips, "in that case, enjoy yourself."

Byleri's face was bright red listening to Sleip and Rys's conversation. *I-I'm happy*, she thought. *I'm totally happy, just... Oh my gosh, I am so embarrassed!* She kept on messaging Sleip's back, her face cast studiously down.

◇The Following Morning◇

Valentine rushed through the forest at top speed. She had left Zanzibar's mansion to come here after sensing a large gathering of humans and demihumans. She had sucked the magic out of a few magic beasts and recovered a bit of her strength, but she needed more power. And so she continued northward, following the information she was able to obtain through her magic. Eventually, she reached a mountainous region covered in snow.

Well, this is peculiar, she thought. *What would a group of humans be doing in a miserable frozen place like this?* Even Valentine, who was from the Dark World and well-seasoned to extreme temperatures, felt a little chilly in this weather. This didn't seem like it would be an easy place for any human or demihuman to live—even a demon might have trouble. Yet Valentine's magic was telling her that just ahead was a great gathering of humans.

Is this a trap? she wondered. *Well, either way, I don't have enough*

magic left to make it to the mansion. I can't turn back now. Valentine pressed forward. And then, between a gap in the trees, she saw a great field of snow. There were a number of large buildings ahead, and in front of them, a great crowd of humans and demihumans doing *something* in the snow.

"Wh-What is this?" Valentine tensed up, her eyes opening wide as she took in the bizarre scene. *What are they all doing here? What's so important that they'd go out in the cold for it?* She looked around. There were children sledding, people skiing down the mountain, others rolling up a giant snowball... *I don't get it at all! Are they seriously enjoying this?!*

Eventually, still eyeing the place with suspicion, she took a faltering step towards the crowd.

Valentine mingled with the crowd of humans. Observing them and eavesdropping on their conversation, she learned the following: There were only this many humans in this region during winter, when the snow piles up. This field of snow was called a "ski slope." And the humans here were doing something called "winter sports," a category of game that included skiing and sledding.

What are they meant to be doing, exactly? "Skiing," and "sledding"... *What would possess them to want to play in this cold?!* The more she learned, the less she understood. *Perhaps, she thought, finally, I should try these "winter sports" for myself...*

◇Meanwhile, on the Ski Slope◇

"Uliminas, are you going to make me pull sleds again?" Sleip looked over the ski slope to find that Uliminas had already set up a sign reading "Sled Ride Registration," and had even prepared numbered tickets for the customers. He grimaced.

Uliminas, who hadn't gotten any more comfortable with the cold since last time, was still bundled up like a snowman, waddling with steps so tiny, you couldn't see her legs move as she weaved between the crowd. When she saw Sleip, she gave him a cheery thumbs-up. "Don't worry!" she said. "I've got everything meowll set up."

Sleip sighed and shook his head. "That isn't exactly the issue here..." he said. But Uliminas pointed at someone behind him. "Hm?" Sleip turned around to see Dalc Horst and the rest of his personal guard. "D-Dalc Horst! Everyone! Wh-What are you doing here?"

"We received a summons from Lady Uliminas early this morning, Lord Sleip," Dalc Horst said. "She said she had a special mission for us, and that everyone available should come, but..." He looked around. "Lord Sleip, what is this mission, exactly?"

Honestly, Sleip thought. It's almost like we never left the Dark Army.

Of course *they'd come*. He smirked and explained the situation to Dalc Horst and the rest.

"I see..." Dalc Horst said. "Humans will board this 'sled,' and we are to carry them up the mountain?"

"That's the gist of it," said Sleip. "Then you just let them slide on down at their leisure."

"I'm not sure I understand what humans get out of this, but I will give it all I'm worth!" Dalc Horst struck a pose.

"This is a game, all right?" Sleip said. "Try to have fun."



Valentine found herself in the queue for Uliminas's sled-riding service. *This looks like the most popular attraction on the mountain*, she thought as she peered at the crowd ahead, waiting for her turn.

There was a team of centaur demihumans standing by to take the customers' sleds by the reins and race up the mountain with incredible speed. Men and women, old and young alike, were grinning and crying out with joy as they sped away. And then they would ride the sled down the slope, crying out just as joyfully.

Valentine was more confused than ever. *They just...ride that thing up and down the mountain? What's so great about that?*

Uliminas, big and round like a snowball, waddled up to her. "Good aftermewn!" she said. "Are mew here for the sleds or the horseback riding?"

"Horseback riding?" Valentine asked, puzzled. She had thought that all that was happening here was the sleds, but she took another look and saw a number of children and adults riding on centaurs' backs as they dashed through the snow. *Horseback riding in the snow?* Valentine blinked. *Is that fun?* Everything was unfamiliar. She had no idea what to do. Panicking, she clutched her head in her hands, eyes open wide.

"Is something wrong?" Uliminas said, looking curiously at her. "Have mew not decided? You'll have a good time either way, I purromise." In her right hand was a sled ticket, and in her left, a horseback riding ticket. She held them out for Valentine, a big cheery smile on her face.

Valentine was at a loss. "I-I..." she stumbled. "I'll have the 'sled' then, if you please..."

"Okay! It's meown silver for meown ticket, or five silver for six. Purretty good value, huh?"

Valentine's eyes went wider. "Wh-What? You need money?" The issue of payment hadn't occurred to her at all. In the Realm of Evil, she had aides to handle such matters and was not used to paying for things herself. All she could do was gawp. *Oh, nooo*, she thought. *It's*

finally *my turn*, and I won't be able to ride the sled! She fumbled and groped around on her person for any spare coins she might have, but she had bolted out of Zanzibar's mansion completely empty-handed. She wasn't carrying anything like money. Without meaning to at all, she started to cry.

"What's wrong, miss?" Uliminas asked. "Did mew forget meowr purrse?"

"U-Um, I... Th-That is..." Valentine stammered. "I... I may have..." She nodded.

Uliminas nodded back. "What a catastrophe!" she said. "Mew poor thing. Here. I'll let mew ride meown time for free." She showed Valentine to the sled-staging area.

Valentine clasped her hands together in front of her chest as Uliminas in her layers of coats waddled on ahead of her. *What a kind, round lady!* She thought. For the first time in her life, she was crying tears of joy.



After her sled ride, Valentine stayed at the foot of the hill, dumbfounded, not moving from the sled. Her lips were trembling, her cheeks pink with exhilaration. "How..." she muttered. "The speed... The bracing cold wind rushing past... The snow... Everything felt so good! I never imagined I would find something so *fun* here! This is far more enjoyable than destroying worlds."

Afterwards, she pleaded with the owner of a sled rental shop, who let her borrow a sled they were about to decommission. She took it and rode it down the hill again and again and again. *To think this world was hiding such a marvel!* she thought, basking in the sensation at the bottom of the hill, a look of pure joy on her face.

She kept on basking as she dashed back up the hill with her sled. She would much rather have gotten one of the centaurs to pull her, but without any money, this was the best she could do. And she reveled in the joy as she played on to her heart's content.



It's over... Valentine thought, standing in a daze. *It's all over...* Before her were the remains of her smashed-up sled. It had already been on its last legs when she'd obtained it, though, and she knew that sooner or later it was going to break. But to Valentine, in that moment, it felt like nothing short of imminent death.

Bereft of her toy, Valentine trudged on through the snow. Ahead of her, she could see a group of children and adults tossing snowballs at each other. *What are those people doing?* she wondered, curiosity

drawing her closer to the sight. *Whatever it is, they look like they're enjoying themselves...* She decided to try speaking to them. "Excuse me!" she said, addressing a nearby man. "What exactly is happening over there?"

The man folded his arms. "Hrm." he said. "Oh, that? It's a game where they make snowballs and throw them at one another. A 'snowball fight,' they call it. They—" A snowball thrown by a woman across from them struck him in the face, interrupting the explanation.

"Got him!" the woman cheered, jumping for joy. "Ghozal's out!"

"Not now, Rys!" the man snapped. Ghozal, it seemed, was his name. "I'm speaking with this woman! That doesn't count!" He was worked up enough that his magic power flared out of his body.

"Now, now, Mister Ghozal," Flio said, hurrying over to Ghozal's side. "Let's keep a hold on ourselves." He placed his hand on Ghozal's shoulder, and the flaring magic vanished.

Valentine's eyes lit up. A *"snowball fight"*... she thought. *Incredible! What joys, what sorrows can be felt, simply by tossing a ball of snow? Oh, it looks like terrific fun!* Her cheeks were turning pink in excitement again as she watched Wyne, Garyl, and Elinàsze pelt each other with snowballs.

"Excuse me," Flio said to her. He had noticed how intently Valentine had been watching the snowball fight. "Would you, perhaps, care to join us?"

Valentine's face lit up. "M-May I?!" She grabbed onto Flio's wrist with both hands.

And so, Valentine joined the snowball fight. She gave it her all and had lots of fun. Soon, she was lost in making snowballs, throwing snowballs, having snowballs thrown at her...

"Hey! I'm gonna get the new girl!" Garyl aimed a snowball straight for Valentine, a big grin on his face. He struck true.

"Yooouuu!" Valentine wailed. "I'll get you back! Just you wait!" Hefting a snowball as big as her head, she ran after Garyl, but Wyne nailed her with a snowball from the side.

"I'll save you, Gare-Gare!" Wyne said. But a magic circle appeared, stopping the snowball from hitting Valentine.

"Huh?" Valentine said, confused. "What was that?"

Flio was behind her, petting Elinàsze on the head. "I know you wanted to help the lady, Elinàsze," he said. "But magic is against the rules, okay?"

"I'm sorry, papa," Elinàsze said. "I just really wanted to help her, and the magic happened on its own..." She hung her head, looking troubled.

"Come now," Valentine said, "don't be so hard on the girl. She only wanted to help." She hugged Elinàsze and bowed to Flio. And

then, unconsciously and without meaning to, she said, "I'm sorry."

"I suppose I can let it slide just this once," Flio said, smirking. "Anyway, let's get back to it!"

Grinning, Valentine hugged Elinàsze a second time. "That was splendid magic," she said.

"Thank you, Miss!" Elinàsze looked up at her happily.

Valentine lost herself in the snowball fight for a while later, smiling the whole time. It was not the smile of a murderous Evil General here to destroy the world, but a girl enjoying a game down to the very depths of her heart.



The sun was setting when Valentine parted ways with Flio's crowd, smiling as she walked through the snow. Sterner, the Mistress of Evil, had ordered her to assist the rebel leader Zanzibar as part of her plan to destroy the world. She was one of the Twelve Evil Generals. She was Valentine.

And yet, at that moment, none of that mattered to her at all. She rested under the shade of a big tree and took out a magic gem. This gem was made for communication. It was her only line back to the Dark World.

"If I destroy this gem," she told herself, "the link between the Dark World and this one will be sundered completely." She placed it down on the snow, readying herself. "There's so much *fun* in this world!" she said. "I want to see more and more of its wonders. I won't let the Realm of Evil destroy it!"

She struck the gem with all the magic power left in her body. It shattered and vanished, not even a shard remaining. *Aha ha...* she thought. *Now I've done it...* A smile on her face, she took a step towards the forest.

Suddenly, the ground gave way under her feet! She plummeted down a hole that had appeared without warning. "No!" Valentine reached out, trying to grab onto the edge of the hole but clutched onto naught but empty air, her body plummeting farther and farther down.

She had fallen into a trap meant for hunting game. With all her power exhausted, she had no means to escape. Desperately, she stretched her arm upward to the top of the hole, but she just couldn't reach. *But...* she thought. *But I decided to live in this world... I wanted to have fun!*

Finally, abandoning all hope, she closed her eyes...and felt something grab hold of her. There was an arm sticking down, grabbing onto hers.

"Huh?" she said, unsure what was happening. She peered out of

the hole to see Hero Gold-Hair.



"It's a good thing I came to check on my magic beast trap," he said. Then, hurriedly glancing over his shoulder, he added, "Hey! Tsuya! Riliangiu! Grab hold of my legs! There's a person in here!"

"My lord!" Riliangiu said. "You mustn't rescue this woman! This is General Valentine of the Twelve Evil Generals! She's here to destroy the world!"

Tsuya looked at Riliangiu in shock. "R-Riliaaangiu!" she said. "Are your meemories back?"

"I—!" Riliangiu blurted out. "That is! I mean! I just...I just know that that's who she is."

"I don't give a damn if she's in the Twelve Evil Generals or the Twelve Drummers Drumming!" Hero Gold-Hair shouted back. "My intuition is telling me not to let her die! Now help!"

"Okaaay!" said Tsuya. "I'm coooming!"

"I—" Riliangiu started. "Yes, my lord."

The two of them grabbed hold of his legs and pulled for all they were worth. The sight of it moved Valentine to tears. *I'm going to get to live in this world after all*, she thought. *Thank goodness... Thank goodness...*

◇That Night, at the Resort Spa◇

"What a day! I had a blast!" Dalc Horst said as he filled Sleip's glass with liquor. Behind him were the rest of Sleip's former personal guard.

"Did you now?" Sleip said, inclining his head. "Don't you think it's a lot of work, running up and down the mountain like that?"

"Not at all, if it makes the people happy! We had a great time!"

"And we got to run all-out in the snow!" another added. "We've never had a chance to do that before."

"I see..." Sleip said. "Well, I'm glad you enjoyed yourselves."

"Everyone was, like, totally having a blast!" Byleri said, smiling. "It was wonderful!" Her words brought a smile to Sleip's face.

Uliminas appeared in front of the group, carrying a wooden tray packed full of food and liquor. "Great job everymeown!" she said. "We made a killing! There's more fur d'oeuvres here than mew could ever need, so take all mew want!"

"Huh? Isn't this super expensive liquor?"

"That food looks amazing too..."

"Thank you, Miss Uliminas!" Sleip's guards cheered as they grabbed for the food and drink.

"You're a hell of a taskmaster, but you know how to reward effort," Sleip said, grabbing a drink himself. "I suppose you just about ran the Dark Army, after all."

Uliminas grinned back at him. “With a layabout Dark Meown like *that*, I *had* to pick up the slack,” she said. She took a bottle herself and drained it. “Enjoy, everymeown!”

Cries of joy rang out.

Rys stepped up to Flio, who was watching the scene with his easygoing smile on his face. “My lord husband, did you notice?” she said. “About the woman from earlier.”

“Miss Valentine, you mean?” Flio asked. Rys nodded. “I saw she was from the Dark World, yeah. But I didn’t sense any kind of hostility.”

“So you chose to overlook it?”

“I did. Obviously, if she tries anything, I’ll do everything I can to stop it, but...” He looked to his side, where Elinàsze had fallen asleep, her arms wrapped around him. Next to her, sleeping in a cuddle pile, were Wyne and Garyl. The three had spent all day playing, and had fallen asleep very early. “She was so good at playing with the children.”

“She was,” Rys admitted. “The four of them looked like they were having a wonderful time.”

“You were pretty happy to hit Mister Ghozal with a snowball yourself, weren’t you, Rys?” Flio teased.

“I-I suppose so.” Rys blushed a little, remembering.

“I don’t think she’s a bad person,” Flio continued. “I’m sure we can get along with her and have fun together in this world.”

“You’re right. I believe I feel the same way.” Rys pressed close to Flio’s shoulder. “The utopia of my lord husband’s dreams,” she mused. “A world where everyone is enjoying life.”

“I don’t know how much I can do,” Flio said, “but I want to do everything I can.”

“And I will be with you every step of the way.” Rys rested her head against Flio’s chest, and the two gently embraced.



While Flio and Rys were having their happy little reverie, Ghozal was sitting on a sofa in front of them, a drunk Uliminas dangling off of him. She pressed her cheek close to his neck. “Hey, Ghozal,” she said, her face bright red. “Whatcha gonna do with me and Balirossa?”

Balirossa darted over too, every bit as drunk as Uliminas. “Yes!” she said. “I would like to know that as well.”

“Me and Balirossa both love mew, y’know!”

“Yes. Ser Uliminas and I both love you very much.” They were staring at Ghozal’s face like they might bore a hole into it from either side. Ghozal sat stoically, a serious expression on his face.

“So, mew know, Ghozal,” Uliminas slurred, “I know we said we

were gonna wait for mew to make up your mind and all...”

“We don’t mean to rush you!” Balirossa said. “It’s just, well... We *are* women, you know. We would like some sort of solid proof that we belong to the man we love.”

“I’ve been meowr confederate for a long time,” Uliminas said. “I’ve done so much for mew...”

“I-I feel that I am always being rescued by you, Ghozal,” Balirossa said. “I must be a terrible burden. But that’s why, even more so, I would give up my life to return the favor...”

Uliminas and Balirossa seemed lost in their respective alcohol-fueled reveries. Ghozal looked at both of them in turn from the corners of his eyes and said, “Hrm. I understand how you feel. I’ve known for a while.” He wrapped an arm around them each. “I swear to you now,” he said. “I will take the two of you as my wives.”

At those words, silence fell over the room. And then, everyone erupted into cheers.

“Congratulations, Lord Ghozal!”

“Long live Lord Ghozal!”

“Hooray! Yahoo!”

In the middle of the cheering crowd was Ghozal.

“S-Sir Ghozal!” said Balirossa. “Do you speak true? You would take us both?”

“Hrm. Demon law permits up to three wives. It’s no problem.”

“But we can’t both be your first wife...”

“I love you both too much to make one of you first and the other second!” Ghozal said, holding them both tight.

The two wrapped their arms around Ghozal’s upper body. “Of all the purrposterous solutions...” Uliminas said.

“But...it suits us,” said Balirossa. The three held each other close, Balirossa and Uliminas on either side, and Ghozal in the middle. They were all weeping openly.

Flio and Rys stood up, and began to applaud. “Congratulations, Mister Ghozal!” Flio said.

“Hrm,” Ghozal smiled back. “Thank you, Mister Flio.”

It was a long time before the room stopped applauding.

Epilogue

Ghozal stood at the entrance to Flio's house under a clear blue sky, scratching the back of his head. He wasn't wearing his usual rugged clothing, but instead a neatly tailored tuxedo. "I don't mind wearing this or anything," he said, "but you didn't have to do all that..."

"Nonsense!" Flio said, smiling and smacking Ghozal amiably on the shoulder. "This is a special day!"

Behind them were Sleip and his twenty-one former subordinates, led by Dalc Horst. "To think that I would be in attendance at the Dark One's wedding!" he said. "Or, I suppose he's just Lord Ghozal now. Ahhh, my heart could just about burst!" He raised his head to the skies, tears of joy streaming down his cheeks.

"Lord Sleip!" Byleri said, proffering a handkerchief. "Like, here!" She had been standing quite close to the former Infernal.

"Thank you, Byleri," he said, taking it and dabbing his damp eyes. "Excuse me." But the handkerchief wasn't nearly enough to stop his torrent of tears.

Dalc Horst and his crew, too, were weeping joyfully as they cheered.

"Lord Ghozal! We are overjoyed to see you wed!"

"Congratulations, Lord Ghozal!"

"Long live Lord Ghozal!"

Ghozal looked uncharacteristically nervous as he surveyed the crowd. "H-Hrm!" he said, his voice hoarse. "What's gotten you all so sentimental? It's just a wedding!" But the cheers and tears showed no sign of abating.

Blossom was watching the scene from a little ways away, smiling happily. Instead of the usual attire she wore for farm work, she had on a fancy dress. "Well, who woulda thunk?" she said. "I suppose Balirossa's gonna be the first one married after all!"

"E-Excuse me..." Maunty said, his voice shaking. "Miss Blossom?"

"We need to talk..." added Hokh'hokton. The two of them seemed terribly nervous. Behind them stood Maunty's wife and sixteen children.

"Hm?" Blossom said. "What's up, you two?"

"Oh..." Hokh'hokton said. "Well... Even though he's Mister Ghozal

now, he was at one time the Dark One, you know..."

"Yeah." Maunty nodded. "In the Dark Army, we were the lowest of the low. It just doesn't feel right, being at his wedding like this..."

"Oh, is that it?" Blossom said, grinning from ear to ear. "There's nothing to worry about. Here!" She turned towards Ghozal and raised her voice. "Hey, Mister Ghozal!"

"Hrm?" he responded. "What is it, Ser Blossom?"

"Do you got a problem with Maunty and Hokh'hokton being at your wedding?"

"Of course not!" Ghozal said, grinning back at her. "Why would I? We're all freeloading at Flio's house, aren't we? The more the merrier, I say."

"L-Lord Ghozal..." Maunty sobbed.

"Th-There's no need for such kind words!" said Hokh'hokton. The pair were in tears.

"S-Stop crying!" Ghozal said. "Everyone's crying too much! Sleip, Dalc Horst! You too! Cut it out!"

"It is only natural, is it not?" Hiya said, appearing beside Ghozal. They were wearing their same scant wrappings as always, but the halo behind their head had reshaped itself to spell out the word "congratulations."

Damalynas was holding on to Hiya's arm, a happy smile on her face. "I would say so," she said. "Everyone's been looking forward to today!"

"W-Well..." Ghozal said, knitting his eyebrows. He seemed terribly awkward. "I suppose, but..."

"I agree with Hiya and Damalynas," Flio said, his smile as carefree as always. "You should celebrate with everyone!"

"But I mean..." Ghozal stammered. It looked like he had more to say, but then the door to Flio's house creaked open.

"The brides have arrived!" Rys declared. As she said, in the entryway were Balirossa and Uliminas, dressed in pure white. Sybe, in its unicorn-rabbit form, strolled out ahead of them, wearing a little tailcoat and bow tie. It snuffled happily as it hopped along, scattering flower petals from a basket it held in its paw.

The brides in their wedding dresses walked forward at a slow, measured pace. For a while, Ghozal could only watch them. "Beautiful..." he muttered, the word leaving his mouth before he could think to stop it.

"Not meow!" Uliminas hissed, her cheeks turning red.

"Sir Ghozal!" said Balirossa, blushing every bit as much as Uliminas. "Honestly..."

In procession behind the brides were Garyl and Elinàsze. Elinàsze wore an angelic dress decorated in white feathers. Garyl was dressed

in a tailcoat and bow tie, identical to the set Sybe was wearing. They were walking in step with Balirossa and Uliminas, holding up the ends of their long veils to keep them from touching the ground.

“Now now, you two,” Rys said, smiling at the brides from her position by the door. “You can hardly blame him; you look *extra* breathtaking today. Don’t you think so, Elinàsze? Garyl? Aren’t they pretty?”

“They’re amazing...” Elinàsze said, smiling brightly.

“Yeah!” Garyl agreed, grinning.

The brides seemed unable to speak after all that praise.

Rys began to clap, and soon the whole party joined in the applause. As they cheered, Uliminas took her place to Ghozal’s left, and Balirossa to his right.



When all three were ready and in their places, Flio held up his hand and cast a spell. An enormous magic circle appeared on the ground beneath their feet. Slowly, it began to revolve. Flio held his hand over his head, and the magic circle rose up into the sky and vanished, whisking the party away to the inside of a building styled like a grand cathedral.

Hiya gasped. “Exalted One!” they said. “Is this...your mindscape?” “What?” Damalynas exclaimed, stunned. “A mindscape? Is that possible?”

The spell that enables its caster to enter their own mind and sculpt it into a mindscape was Hiya’s specialty. It was magic that only a djinn could use. However, when Flio came to this world, the gods had blessed him with the power of Transcendence. As soon as he had reached Level 2, all of his abilities rocketed far above their limits, and he instantly learned every spell and every skill that existed in this world. One of them was the spell Epiphany. When he had been struck by magic from the Dark World by an enemy djinn, this spell activated, instantly granting him knowledge of all the magic to exist in the Dark World as well, including the magic Hiya could use as a djinn.

“I was aware that the Exalted One had mastered the magic of the djinn,” Hiya said, bowing deeply. “But to create such an elaborate mindscape in so short a time! Extraordinary!”

Ghozal, Uliminas, and Balirossa stood in the cathedral’s chapel in Flio’s mindscape, waiting as Flio stepped up in front of them. “Are you really okay with this, Mister Ghozal?” he asked, quietly. “You know I’m not a priest...”

“That doesn’t matter,” Ghozal said. “I’ve never been much for worship. Why would I go to some god’s servant for a blessing when I could get one from my best friend Mister Flio!”

“Best friends...” Flio repeated, smiling happily. “All right. Then with your permission, I will play the role of priest.” Flio took a deep breath. Belano was waiting behind him, carrying three wedding rings on a small tray.

And so the ceremony began. Ghozal, the former Dark One, was to be married at last.



The ceremony had gone off without a hitch. After they were finished in Flio’s mindscape, Flio returned the party to where they had been, in front of his house. There was a large table nearby, set with dish after dish of food. Rys and Byleri had gone all out cooking for the wedding day. The two of them had prepared a feast for all the many

residents of Flio's house. When they had first come to live here, they'd had hardly any experience cooking, but over time they had become so skilled that they could probably run a professional kitchen.

Ghozal stood in front of the crowd with Uliminas riding on his right shoulder and Balirossa on his left. "Meet my wives!" he said, grinning. "I promise you, I will love them both equally for as long as I live!"

Atop Ghozal's shoulders, Uliminas and Balirossa were stealing glances at each other. "I... I hope our partnership is a long and fruitful one, Ser Uliminas," Balirossa said.

"Mew can count on it!" The two shared a smile.

Sleip was standing nearby with Byleri pressed close. "Say, Byleri," he said. "Perhaps we should make like those three and—"

Byleri cut him off, holding a finger to her mouth. *It's okay*, she seemed to be saying. *I totally get it*. "Don't worry," she said. "I'll be happy as long as I can, like, be with you. Y'know?" She wrapped her arms around him in a fond embrace.

"Byleri..." Sleip said, holding her gently.

"Balirossa... Byleri..." Blossom said, drinking straight out of a bottle as she watched. "Everyone's finding love all of a sudden... Hey, Belano! Us single girls gotta keep each other company, huh?" She wrapped an arm around Belano, who was nearby serving herself food.

"I-I don't drink!" Belano squeaked, extracting herself from Blossom's grasp.

"C'mon!" Blossom said. "Live a little, Belano! Ah, well. Suit yourself." She looked up at the sky. "But it sure is nice, how happy those two are..."

"It is..." Belano agreed.



Flio was watching the reception from some ways away, his wife Rys pressed up against him.

"I can't believe that Ghozal, marrying two girls at once," Rys said. "Ah, but I suppose demons *are* allowed to take up to three wives..." She glanced at Flio.

"Well, I'm a human," Flio said. "All I need is you, Rys." He pulled her in by her shoulder, hugging her softly.

"My lord husband..." she said, her face lightly flushed. "Thank you."

Just then, Elinàsze came running up. "Papa," she said, "you should get some food!"

"You too, mama!" Garyl said. "It's all delicious!"

Elinàsze took Flio's hand and Garyl took Rys's, leading their

parents towards the table.

“Aha ha,” Flio laughed. “All right, all right!”

“Don’t pull, you two!” said Rys. Both children had big smiles on their faces.

As Elinàsze and Garyl brought Flio and Rys over to the rest of the party, Rys leaned over to whisper in her husband’s ear. “My lord husband,” she said, turning slightly red. “Didn’t our children say the other day that they wanted a younger brother or sister?”

“They did, didn’t they,” Flio said with his usual easygoing smile. “Well, I suppose we can’t disappoint them!”

The merrymaking lasted well into the night.

Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part 4

◇ A Mansion, High in the Mountains ◇

"What is *happening*?!" Zanzibar screamed in frustration, doubled over and clutching his head.

"Lord Zanzibar!" said Meiden, running up to her master and putting a hand on his shoulder. "Calm yourself! Please!"

"Calm myself?!" he spat. "As *if*! Valentine of the Twelve Evil Generals is missing! She vanished from her room at one point and dropped completely off the map! And now we can't even contact that familiar of hers?!"

Meiden furrowed her brow. "I... I am terribly sorry," she said. "I tried using magic to see where they had gone, but I simply couldn't find them..." She slumped her shoulders.

The two looked at each other. For a while, neither of them moved. "Maybe..." Zanzibar said. "Should we try contacting the Realm of Evil?"

"We would need one of the communication gems Riliangiu or Valentine had in order to do that..."

"Can't you make one with your magic?"

"I... I cannot," Meiden said. "Without the magic of the Dark World, I'm afraid that it would be impossible. Skilled though I am, I cannot call upon the magic of other worlds..."

Zanzibar clicked his tongue in anger and stamped his feet.

"Meiden," he said, "how many soldiers do we have left?"

"We've been suffering loss after loss to the Dark One Yuigarde..." Meiden said, downcast. "And many of our number have deserted..."

"Cut the crap. How many soldiers do we *have*?!"

"Y-Yes, Master..." Meiden gulped. "I believe we have...just under two hundred."

"Two...hundred?" Zanzibar's eyes twitched. "But there were so many demons who promised us aid... So many demons angry with the Dark One Yuigarde, flocking to our banner! And now we don't even have two hundred soldiers..."

"I-I'm so sorry..."

Zanzibar clutched his head. "If the Dark One Yuigarde were to attack this mansion..."

"I do not believe we have the strength to defeat the Dark One..." Meiden said. "Even repelling an attack would be difficult."

“Ghh!” Zanzibar gritted his teeth and stamped and stamped. “I hate it! I *hate* it!”

That night, Zanzibar left the mansion. He gathered together anything that might possibly be of value to take with him in his carriage and escaped under cover of darkness. After that, he traveled to his old outposts and recovered whatever resources he could before fleeing to the west.

“Remember me, Yuigarde...” he said, looking back out the window. “I will be the one to kill you!”

And so the curtains closed, more or less, on Zanzibar’s rebellion.

◇The West◇

The Dark One Yuigarde gazed out over the desert with bloodshot eyes, his arms crossed over his chest. “Hey morons!” he roared. “What’s the holdup?! Find him!”

Chasing after Zanzibar, Yuigarde had found the rebellion’s old outposts and destroyed them one after another. In one, he’d managed to capture a rebel before they could escape. After some persuasion, the rebel told him that Zanzibar had fled to the west. And so, Zanzibar had ordered the westernmost part of his territory to be thoroughly searched.

“Listen up,” he said, addressing his whole army in a great speech. “I’d be a laughingstock of a Dark One if I sat back and let this moron live after he tried to kill me! Capture Zanzibar and bring him to me! I don’t care if he’s alive or dead! Got it?!”

Yuigarde took the greater part of the Dark Army with him and headed west after Zanzibar. But in the west of his territory lay the vast Gorbi Desert. For centuries, there had been stories of travelers being swallowed up by the desert sands. It was an enormous region of dry land, with no water to drink and dunes that shifted in the wind, making navigation nigh impossible. It was hostile to life. But the Dark One Yuigarde brooked no retreat.

For days on end, the hunt continued through that desolate land, with no orders other than Yuigarde’s command to “find Zanzibar, even if it kills you.” With each day that passed, more and more of his soldiers deserted; their numbers were dwindling with astonishing speed. The deserters spread word of Yuigarde’s latest act of savagery—leading an army to die in the desert—and his popularity as Dark One plummeted back down to rock bottom.

But Yuigarde, ignorant of his declining reputation, pressed on. “Find him!” he shouted. “Find him no matter what!”

◇The Dark Citadel◇

Yorminyt, Hugi-Mugi, and Calsi'im had gathered in the masterless throne room. Before them, in front of the throne, stood Phufun.

"Esteemed Infernals," Phufun said. "I am afraid today's meeting will be another short one. When you have completed your respective paperwork, feel free to spend the rest of the day however you see fit." She adjusted her false glasses. "That concludes this morning's communications. Now—"

"May I assk a quesstion?" Yorminyt raised her hand.

Phufun sighed. "What is it, Infernal Yorminyt?"

"It hasss been daysss since the Dark One left for the wessst," Yorminyt said, licking her lips with her slender tongue. "But we've received no ordersss and no reportsss. What isss happening, I wonder?" A smile teased over her face.

Phufun adjusted her glasses again, trying her best to conceal her own unease. "Of course," she said. "As the present leader of the Infernal Four, I can understand why you would have misgivings..." Again, she adjusted her glasses. "We are...currently assembling reports concerning the success of the operation. I promise you I will give you a full account when everything has been...collated."

"Then jussst tell usss what you *do* know."

"I-I am afraid anything I could tell you now might contain inaccuracies," Phufun said. "Unfortunately, I cannot give you a report at present..."

"Hiss..." Yorminyt fixed her icy gaze on Phufun. Phufun returned it head-on, although she did adjust her glasses several times out of nerves. "Very well," Yorminyt said at last. "I can sssee I'm not going to get anything more out of you. I will retire for the day." True to her word, Yorminyt left the throne room.

I haven't heard anything at all from Master Yuigarde... Phufun thought. I'd like to know as much as her about what's happening in the west...

Once again Phufun adjusted her glasses. How many times had she made that nervous gesture during this meeting? She had completely lost count.

◇Houghtow College of Magic◇

Although Houghtow City was located in the countryside, far from the capital, the Houghtow College of Magic was a magic school with an official license from the kingdom. And though it was first and foremost associated with magic, it also had many classes on general subjects—reading and arithmetic and the like. As an educational institution, it was a great boon to the area.

Today, Belano was in the newly built school store, looking around with a smile on her face. Behind her, the rest of the college's staff filtered inside.

The Fli-o'-Rys General Store'd had a new building constructed in order to house a cafeteria and school store for the College of Magic. It was two stories tall, had a basement, and sat right next to the school. The first floor held the store and the cafeteria, and the second floor was set up as a boarding house. The basement was a storeroom where they kept ingredients for the cafeteria and inventory for the store. Flio himself had built it in a single day.

On the same day that he'd received official permission from the college, Flio had a brief meeting with Taclyde, the school administrator, to determine the ideal location, and then immediately began casting magic. Wood flew in straight from the forest and assembled itself; Flio did it all on his own.

"I'd heard that Mister Flio was something else," Taclyde marveled. "But *this*..." He looked around with deep curiosity.

"So now we have a school store..." said Metálzobi, the projection arts teacher, looking over the display cases with a smile on his face. "I would like to fill this up with art supplies."

"And I would like to stock some magic gems to increase offensive magic power," the offensive magic teacher Oryou said, copying Metálzobi in looking over the display cases.

Yukhi, who studied magical cooking, was examining the cafeteria. "But we mustn't forget food!" she said. "I do hope we'll sell more here than just lunch boxes and bread. I'd like to run a proper cafeteria, if I may..."

"But that Mister Flio..." Taclyde said, glancing around at the other teachers. "Making a building like this in a single day, even procuring the materials with his magic...vanquishing djinn...casting barriers..." He shook his head. "He can purify magic gems, brew potions, and heal muscle fatigue in a second too... If only he'd come teach at the College of Magic!"

"If only..." said Metálzobi.

"I agree," said Oryou.

"Yes, absolutely," said Yukhi.

Taclyde turned to look at Belano. "Miss Belano," he said, completely serious. "Do you think you might be able to persuade him?"

Belano silently shook her head.

Taclyde smiled wearily. "Of course. I thought not. Mister Flio has his hands full with the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, doesn't he?" He shook his head. "Well, setting aside the issue of asking Mister Flio to teach at

the college, I would very much like it if his children were to attend our school."

"Huh?" Not just Belano, but the rest of the faculty, cocked their heads in confusion.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Oryou said. "We don't teach children that young!"

"Oh, that's right," Taclyde said. "I forgot I hadn't officially announced it!" He cleared his throat. "Everyone, I have an announcement. This spring, the Houghtow College of Magic will open a new department for teaching the lower grades. From now on, children will study at our school!"

The faculty was stunned. "What?!"

"Are you serious?!"

A lower-grades department... In other words, classes for minors from the age of seven through fifteen. That was in terms of human development, anyway. Flio's half-lupine children were growing up fast, and that would need to be accounted for.

"I've heard Mister Flio's children have been growing fast because their mother is a demihuman," Taclyde said. "I expect they will be the equivalent of eight or nine in human years by the time spring rolls around. More than enough for them to take classes!" As he spoke, Taclyde squeezed Belano's shoulder. "I'll leave the persuasion to you, Miss Belano."

Belano went silent. For a moment, she seemed to be deep in thought. And then she nodded.

"Great! Thanks a million!" Taclyde pumped his fist in victory.

While the other faculty chatted happily about Mister Flio's children attending the college, Belano was lost in her own head. *I wonder if I'll get to teach Garyl and Elinàsze...* she thought, a smile on her face. *I'll have to teach lower-grade classes, then. First I'll need to get qualifications. And I only have until this spring...*

Her lips pursed tight, she nodded once, determined.

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

"I must apologize for taking so long to pay you a visit!" The Maiden Queen sat in Flio's living room in a casual outfit, smiling happily and bowing her head. She had arranged for the castle's witches to send her here using Teleportation. This wasn't an official visit—she had come here in secret.

"No, no!" Flio said, bowing *very* politely. "The present you arranged for us the other day was more than enough."

They carried on in that vein for a while, bowing and exchanging polite pleasantries, neither side willing to accept defeat. "No, no!" said the Queen. "After all, you have done so much for us..."

“No, no!” said Flio. “We are just happy to be of assistance...”

They did this every time the Maiden Queen came to visit. It was practically a ritual.

Finally, their battle of pleasantries concluded, Flio beckoned to his children who were waiting in the back with Wyne. The twins came running. “A-Anyway,” he said. “This is Garyl, and this is Elinàsze.”

“My name is Elinàsze, Your Majesty,” Elinàsze said, curtsying with impeccable form. “Thank you for supporting my father and mother.”

“My! What splendid manners, Miss Elinàsze!” the Maiden Queen said. “But you know, it is your father and mother who have supported *me*, more than the other way around.” She poked out her tongue playfully at the girl.

“Yes.” Elinàsze grinned. “I know.” Then her smile stiffened, and she bowed. “I’m sorry! Please pretend you didn’t hear that!” She had intended to be on her best behavior, and hadn’t meant to express that so brazenly. She was panicking.

“Ah, I’m sorry...” Flio began. “My daughter—”

But the Maiden Queen smiled. “No, no!” she said. “I don’t mind in the slightest! I’m glad you have such an honest daughter. Elinàsze, I promise to do my best not to burden your father with too many responsibilities.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you.” Elinàsze smiled and nodded.

“And you’re Garyl!” the Queen said. During the entire previous exchange, Garyl had been staring at the Queen’s face from the side. “Excuse me, is something the matter with my face?” She reached up to touch her cheek.

“So pretty...” Garyl mumbled.

“I’m sorry?” The Queen hadn’t been expecting that. She blushed furiously, her face as red as a boiled lobster all the way to her ears and the tips of her fingers. She froze in place.

“I’m Garyl, Miss Maiden Queen!” Garyl said, grinning and holding out his hand. “Let’s be friends!”

“Ah!” the Queen said, her composure fully shattered. “Y-Yes! L-Let’s...” Still blushing, she took his hand.

“Ehe hee,” Garyl giggled, blushing a little himself. “I shook the pretty lady’s hand...” That just made the Queen blush harder.

Th-That Garyl! she thought, so shocked that she even forgot to breathe. She stood there staring at the boy’s innocent face, her heart pounding, unable to move.





After she regained her composure, the Maiden Queen settled down in the living room to talk with Flio. “Incidentally,” she said, “the Houghtow College of Magic, it seems, will be opening a new department for teaching the lower grades this spring.”

“Oh, really!” Flio said.

“We received a request for official approval just the other day. It’s gone through all the proper channels and has been thoroughly discussed. I see no reason not to allow it.”

“I see... Perhaps Elinàsze and Garyl could attend school there...”

“The Houghtow College of Magic is authorized by the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode herself. I expect they will receive a splendid education.”

They chatted like this for some time until it was time for the Maiden Queen to take her leave. “We must do this again, if I can find the time,” she said.

“Of course!” Flio nodded. “You’re welcome in our house anytime.”

The four witches the Maiden Queen had brought with her began to chant, and after some time a portal appeared. It would have taken Flio a matter of seconds, with no need for an incantation. It was not that the witches were unskilled at their art—Flio was simply that much more absurdly powerful than everyone else.

“Dad,” Garyl said, looking up at Flio, “when is Miss Maiden Queen gonna come back?”

Flio gave it some thought. “I’m afraid the Maiden Queen is very busy with her work at the castle...”

“Oh...” Garyl looked a little sad.

Flio smiled kindly at his son. *Perhaps I should offer to take Garyl along the next time I have business at Klyrode Castle...*



The Maiden Queen returned to her chambers and collapsed onto her bed. She had regained her composure, but there were still traces of red lingering on her face. She stared at the ceiling, replaying her meeting with Garyl in her mind. He had called her a pretty lady...

Garyl... she thought. What a peculiar boy he is.

◇Houghtow City—Fli-o’-Rys General Store◇

Greanyl and Byleri had just returned from sending a shipment of goods to Klyrode Castle. “Like, see you later, Greanyl!” Byleri said,

grinning.

“My thanks for your assistance,” Greanyl said, bowing deeply.

After they parted ways, Byleri went back in the store through its back entrance, and entered a particular room. She peered out the door, looking left and right, making sure that nobody was around before she quietly shut it behind her.

This was one of the sitting rooms in the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. Flio, the proprietor, and Uliminas, the treasurer, used it to conduct business meetings. But that wasn't why Byleri was here.

“Mx. Hiya!” she whispered.

Hiya materialized in the empty room and addressed her. “Ser Byleri, welcome back from your trip to the royal capital,” they said. “So, about the matter we discussed...?”

Byleri took off her rucksack and produced a paper parcel, which she handed to Hiya. “Like, here ya go!” she said. “The book with all the stuff about, y'know, the lady knight and tentacle monster...”

“Thank you, Ser Byleri!” Hiya took the book with a smile on their face. “May I ask,” they said, drawing closer to Byleri, unable to contain their eagerness, “what manner of book you purchased for yourself? Perhaps later, we can...”

“Oh,” Byleri said, blushing and scratching the back of her head. “I actually, like, didn't buy one for myself this time...”

Hiya's eyes widened in shock. “Wh-What?” they said. “S-Ser Byleri, you didn't procure *any* kind of pornography?”

“I-I...” Byleri stammered. “I kinda wish you wouldn't call it that...” She cleared her throat. “Actually, like, y'know, I think I'm gonna stop buying that kinda book. Like. Um. It's embarrassing to say, but I have a partner now, y'know? And he's totally wonderful... Ehe hee...”

Hiya fixed Byleri with a piercing stare. “I see,” they said. “Now that you have experienced the real thing, you can no longer be satisfied with mere images...”

“Um... I wouldn't put it like that, but, like, I guess...”

Hiya nodded and gave the matter some thought before speaking again. “Ser Byleri, forgive me if I am speaking out of turn...”

“Like, yeah?”

“I, too, have someone I love.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And every night, I dote on her with great affection.”

“Uh-huh. Ehe hee...”

“And I know the happiness of her love in turn.”

“M-Mx. Hiya! This is a little...y'know?” She laughed nervously.

“And so, I will happily please my love, for in so doing I bring myself happiness. Do you disagree?”

“Oh?!” Byleri seemed to realize where Hiya was going with this.

Her eyes shot open.

Hiya was watching Byleri's reactions like a hawk. "I wish to know what I must do to bring my love the most pleasure. Don't you as well?"

Byleri nodded seriously as Hiya produced a book and gave it to her. She looked at its title. *One Hundred Ways to Please Your Husband*. She cracked it open. "Mx. Hiya!"

"What is it, Ser Byleri?"

"I was totally wrong," Byleri said. "I have to learn more and more! For Sleip's sake!"

"Then we have come to an accord?"

"Yeah, totally!" Byleri gave Hiya a firm handshake. "So, then, like... Can I, y'know, borrow this book?"

"Only if I may borrow the book of horse pornography you acquired the other day."

"I *really* wish you wouldn't call it that..."

◇At a Restaurant◇

At a restaurant in a town somewhere, Valentine was gobbling down plate after plate of food with ravenous speed. Before her was a pile of fine dining—enough for ten humans. She seemed determined to fit every last morsel into her stomach.

She sighed. "The food in this place is delicious! Just...amazing!" With that said, she dove straight back into the pile of food.

Valentine had been traveling with Hero Gold-Hair ever since he rescued her from his own pitfall trap meant for catching magic beasts. Riliangiu had fallen on her knees apologizing for cutting off communications, but Valentine smiled and said, "Oh, I don't care about that anymore. How about we just let bygones be bygones?"

Riliangiu sighed with relief.

Valentine seemed like a different person traveling with Hero Gold-Hair than when she had been an Evil General. She greeted every day with a smile and seemed to enjoy every hour. It was impossible to believe that she had once been General Valentine of the Twelve Evil Generals, who struck fear into the hearts of her enemies.

She kept right on eating, stuffing her cheeks full with a blissful expression on her face. Every now and then, she would stop to squeeze her cheeks and cry out with joy before returning to the food.

"I'm glad you like the food," Hero Gold-Hair said. "But do you really need to eat so much?"

"Gobble...snarf...smack... Hrmf? Hrrfhmf rhf hmr." Valentine's cheeks were too full to make proper words.

Hero Gold-Hair grimaced. "Fine, fine," he said. "We'll talk after you've finished your food. I haven't a damn clue what you're saying..."

Valentine smiled and nodded, and grabbed another plate, shoveling its contents into her mouth as well.

"Miss Vaaalentine really eats a looot, doesn't she..." Tsuya said, staring with wide eyes as she brought water over for everyone. "I mean, I knooow we only just meeet..."

"Oh," said Riliangiu. "Miss Valentine has the ability to convert food into magic power, you see..."

"What was that?" Hero Gold-Hair looked confused.

"I told you the other day that Miss Valentine was one of the Twelve Evil Generals, did I not?"

"Yes... I remember you saying something like that..."

"Those chosen as Evil Generals must possess great magic power as well as the ability to use the magic power in their body for sustenance. When she travels to other worlds, she must draw on a tremendous amount of magic simply to sustain her body."

"What in the blazes?" Hero Gold-Hair was taken aback.

"In order to exist outside of the Dark World, such as in the world of Klyrode, she must do one of three things. She must consume magic gems, humans who possess magic, or food. Converting food into magic power, by the way, is the least efficient method of all. She will need a considerable volume of food."

"I see... Well, that last part I could tell by looking." Hero Gold-Hair sighed. "I saved her and told her she could come with us, after all. It's my responsibility to look out for her. But she *does* eat an *awful* lot..." He turned to look at Tsuya. "Well, at least we have all that money we got for selling those magic gems! Tsuya, you have the money, right?"

"Ummm..." Tsuya said. "Hero Gold-Haaair... Actuallyyy... We need to taaalk..."

"Talk? What about?" Hero Gold-Hair folded his arms and cocked his head.

"Well... It's juuust... We're almost out of moooney..."

"What?! How?!" Hero Gold-Hair's eyes shot open in shock.

Tsuya slumped her shoulders. "Remeeember, Hero Gold-Hair? When Miss Vaaalentine joined, you took us to a faaancy restaurant. You said you wanted to give her a weelcome party..."

"Yes, I remember that..."

"The biiill for the party was twoooo-thiiirds what we got from the geeems..."

Hero Gold-Hair reeled back like he had been struck. He was at a loss for words. It had been his own fault all along. For a while he

thought, and then he heaved a great sigh. “Well, there’s no use crying over spilled milk,” he said. “But when Valentine’s done eating, we need to find another job!”

“Y-Yes, Hero Gold-Haaair...”

Hero Gold-Hair looked back at Valentine, who was still deeply engrossed in her meal. She looked like she was having the time of her life. He gave a dry smirk. “That woman...” he said. “Eating away without a care in the world...”

He and Riliangiu took the cups of water Tsuya had brought them. For a second he considered ordering something himself, but he thought better of it and swallowed his words along with the drink.

◇The Dark Citadel◇

Calsi’im was in his chambers on the second floor of the Dark Citadel—the floor where the Infernal Four had their rooms—muttering to himself as he cleaned up the mountain of paperwork on his desk. “Hells below! So many chores today! It’s all because the Neophyte Tournament is being held today in the underground coliseum. If I don’t handle it, nobody will!”

Just then, behind him, he heard the sound of tea being poured. Tia the magic doll stepped up beside him, carrying a cup of tea on a tray. “Perhaps you should take a break, Calsi’im?”

Tia always has such perfect timing with her tea... “Thank you, Tia, much obliged!” he said cheerfully as he accepted the cup. He took it in both hands and brought it to his skeletal mouth, breathing in the aroma before slowly pouring it down his throat.

“Ahhh!” he exclaimed, smiling. “Your tea is as delicious as always, Tia!”

Usually, this was where Tia would ask if he would like another cup. But today, she said something different. “Is it not time for you to go to the underground coliseum, Calsi’im?” she asked.

“Oh, right!” The tea had put him in relaxation mode. He had almost forgotten that he had a job to do. Calsi’im clambered out of his seat, while Tia picked up the black robes draped over a nearby table.

“Here are your robes, Calsi’im,” she said, handing them to him.

“Thank you, Tia! You’re always such a help. How do I look?”

“You look splendid.” As a magic doll, Tia’s facial expressions did not change with her mood, so her face was completely blank as she spoke. But Calsi’im nodded nonetheless, satisfied.

“Well then,” he said. “I’m off!” He bolted out of the room as fast as his legs could carry him.

“Take care!” Tia said, bowing politely.

After Calsi’im left, Tia stepped over to the paperwork he had been working on and picked it up. This was pure busywork—far below

Calsi'im's station as one of the Infernal Four. But Calsi'im had been going through page after painstaking page, all on his own.

Tia silently looked over the papers, and then, holding them in her arms, left the room.

◇The Dark Citadel—Phufun's Laboratory◇

Tia stepped inside the laboratory. "Excuse me," she said. Phufun, who had been performing magic experiments, stopped and turned to face her.

"Well, well," she said, pressing her false glasses up against the ridge of her nose. "You are Calsi'im's magic doll, are you not? Do you need something from me?"

"My lady, I have brought Calsi'im's finished paperwork," Tia said, stepping forward.

"Oh! You've learned how to carry paperwork? How clever of you! Thank you so much!" Phufun pointed to her desk, indicating for Tia to place the papers there, but instead Tia hurled the paperwork at the succubus's face. "Hey! What was *that*?!" she shouted, startled by Tia's sudden disorderly behavior.

Tia marched right up to Phufun. "What are all these papers for?" she said. "My master Calsi'im is one of the Infernal Four. Why are you making him process all of your rubbish? Your paperwork is causing no end of trouble for him!" She was not a big doll, and didn't even come up to Phufun's chest, but she glared up at her the best she could.

Phufun gulped. "A-Are you really a magic doll?" Magic dolls are clockwork puppets designed only to do what their master orders them to. They are meant to be without emotion. But Tia had clearly come here of her own volition, threw around her hated paperwork, and was now glaring at Phufun with evident anger.

Come to think of it... Phufun thought. *I've heard of something like this. If the owner of a magic doll falls in love with it, in rare cases it will develop a sense of self and begin to act on its own...* "Very well," she said. "I'll see what I can do about the paperwork. Is that all?"

"I am satisfied," Tia said. She picked up the paperwork she herself had scattered all over the floor, arranged it neatly, and set it down on the desk. "Please pardon the intrusion." She bowed deeply and left the room.

Tia returned to Calsi'im's room and sat down in her chair by the window that Calsi'im had set up for her. "You can look out the window from here!" he had said. "That way, you won't get lonely when I'm not around."

Tia gazed out the window. "I *am* lonely, though..."

The devil Belianna charged ahead, swinging her scythe in a wide arc. “Hah!” she said. “I’m not done with you yet, dammit!”

“I’m not gonna lose to a puny thing like you!” Her opponent, the giant Goliath, swung his arms with a great shout. But Belianna deftly evaded his blows and struck him in the left leg with her scythe. “Ngh!” Goliath cried out in pain.

“Hah. Your body’s damn big, but your legs are wide open!” She swung again, focusing her attacks on the giant’s left leg. She hit again, and again, and then a fourth time... “And take *this*!” Grinning joyfully, she swung her scythe a fifth time, striking again in the leg.

That was more than Goliath’s leg could take. It shattered apart, and the giant fell to the ground. Without wasting a second, Belianna leapt onto his face, pressing the blade of her scythe against his throat.

“And match!” Calsi’im said, raising his hand from the judge’s seat. At that, Belianna withdrew her scythe and jumped down from Goliath’s face, landing on the coliseum ground with perfect poise. “The winner is Belianna!”

“Hah!” she said, slinging her scythe over her shoulder and shaking with excitement. “*That* much was clear without your damned announcement!” she said, walking up to the judge’s seat and sitting down on Calsi’im’s desk, staring at him straight on. “But tell me, Calsi’im, do you not think I am damned qualified to be on the Infernal Four?”

“Certainly!” Calsi’im said, nodding. “The Dark One Yuigarde has heard of you, after all! If you win the Neophyte Tournament, you might very well hear something soon!”

The Neophyte Tournament was an event where newcomers to the Dark Army who hoped to earn high ranks battled against each other to see who was worthy. And the ones who held the highest rank of all were the Infernal Four. Belianna, who had just won her match, was considered an A-tier demon in the Dark Army. There was hardly anyone stronger than her.

“But damned if I didn’t win...” She sighed, turning away to face the coliseum wall. “There’s hardly any damned A-tier demons left to fight,” she said. “I’m *damned* sure to be the next Infernal, aren’t I?”

“Yes, yes,” Calsi’im said, nodding cheerfully. “You were quite strong out there today! I’ll make certain the Dark One Yuigarde hears about this!”

Belianna glanced at Calsi’im out of the corner of her eye and impatiently clicked her tongue.

Belianna kept fighting her way through the A-tier preliminaries. Today she had come to a place in the forest where the army of Klyrode and the Dark Army had outposts facing off against each other. “I must win the damned preliminaries, and then I must wait to hear back from my superiors. What a damned nuisance...”

She left the Dark Army outpost and sneaked through the forest past where the Klyrode army was encamped to reach the main road. “I just want them to recognize my damned power and make me a damned Infernal. If I’m going to catch the Dark One’s damned eye, I must show him what I’m worth...”

Belianna hefted her scythe. She could see dust being kicked up by wagon wheels on the road ahead—likely a supply team headed for the Klyrode outpost. Suddenly, a great number of demons swarmed out of the forest, attacking the wagons! The Dark Army must have dispatched a force to disrupt the Klyrode supply lines.

There were two hundred demons, more than enough to crush the supply team flat. But as the demons got within striking range, one by one they were sent flying back. Belianna took a closer look. There was a man standing on top of the wagon, wearing a blue wolf mask, his arm extended. He was casting magic, striking back every demon that ran up to attack.

Belianna chuckled. “I seem to have happened on a damned big target. The Wolf of Justice!” She ran down the road, scythe at the ready. “They say that after we lost the northern outpost to MacTaulo, the Dark One had this damned position fortified as much as he damned could. But that damned Wolf of Justice is taking the attack team out by his damn self...”

In no time, she had closed the distance between them. “Wolf of Justice!” she declared. “I will defeat you and secure my damned place in the Dark Army! I’ll bring your damned head to the Dark One and become an Infernal!”



A few minutes later, Belianna found herself in the Klyrode army camp, bound by magic thread and thoroughly captured. “H-How...” Even now, she looked like she couldn’t believe this was happening.

Belianna thought back to the fight, trying as hard as she could to remember what had happened. “I closed the damned distance to the wagon from behind... I was in the Wolf of Justice’s damned blind spot... But then... *Then...*” It was no use. She had no idea what kind of attack the Wolf of Justice had used on her. That was as far as her memories went. It seemed like she must have lost consciousness.

She looked absolutely miserable.

After some time, the Klyrode army let Belianna and the other

demons who had been arrested go free and sent them back to the Dark Army outpost. There, she boarded a carriage and returned to the Dark Citadel. The whole time she kept asking herself how she could have possibly lost, but for the life of her she couldn't remember what had happened. "What did he do? How did the damned Wolf of Justice beat me?"

In her chambers in her own mansion, Belianna swung her scythe viciously. An image of the Wolf of Justice kept floating in and out of her mind. "Dammit!" she shouted. "Damn you, Wolf of Justice! This isn't over!" In her eyes burned the fires of revenge!

◇Klyrode Army Camp◇

Flio, in his blue wolf mask, saw the captured Dark Army soldiers off in his wagon. Wyne was standing next to him, a matching red wolf mask on her face. "The bad guys were really weak this time, weren't they, dada?"

"Wy— I mean, Red Justice, I told you to call me Wolf Justice while we're here, remember?"

Wyne scratched the top of her head. "Oh! That's right. I'm sorry, dada." It seemed that she hadn't quite internalized it yet.

Flio smirked. "According to the information Greanyl's team brought us, most of the Dark Army's fighting force is away. I suppose they left the weaker ones holding the line against the Klyrode army." He folded his arms. *But that girl at the end with the scythe was fairly strong... Although it only took one lightning bolt to knock her out.*

"Mm!" Wyne said. "It was fun to have a big fight! It's been a while!" Grinning toothily, she ran up to Flio. "But, dada, I'm hungry!"

"I told you not to call me dada right now..." Still smirking under his mask, Flio retrieved a giant hunk of meat from his Bottomless Bag. Holding it by the exposed bone, he handed it over to the ravenous wyvern.

"Yaaay!" Wyne cheered, leaping on the chunk of meat and sinking her teeth in greedily. "Meat! Meat!"

Wyne had been the strongest dragon soldier in the Dark Army, but as strong as she was, she was still growing. Her body needed a huge amount of food in order to mature. Before long, she devoured the meat completely.

I suppose it's going to be another huge five-course meal of meat, Flio thought as he watched her gobble it up, smiling affectionately.

The two rode the wagon back towards Houghtow City.

◇The Calgosi Coast◇

Flying high in the sky, Loplanz took a deep breath. Then he

opened his mouth and expelled a terrific stream of fire.

“What?!” Captain Eddsarch, the Blackbeard Corsair, looked up in shock. “That useless bird can breathe fire now?!” The flames struck his ship. Within moments, it was an inferno. “Landlubbers!” Eddsarch hollered. “I was certain this would be the night I would check in to Junia’s place! Everyone! Abandon ship!”

“Aye aye, Captain!” The pirates aboard Eddsarch’s flagship leapt off the sides into the water and swam for the open sea.

Shaxablana of the Ladyshark Pirates sighed as she watched Eddsarch’s men swim towards her own ship. “Ugh... Are they expecting me to bail them out *again*?”

“Captain,” one of her pirates said. “Your orders?”

“Isn’t it obvious? We turn around and go home.”

As Shaxablana ordered, the pirate ships turned and sailed back out to sea, full speed ahead.

“What?!” Eddsarch screamed. “Shaxablana! What are you doing?! It’s me! Let me on board!” But the ships kept sailing on out of the inlet, without any heed for his objections, Eddsarch and his men floundering desperately after them.

“I... I did it!” Loplanz let out a sigh of relief as he watched Eddsarch from high in the sky.

“Gah ha ha!” Polseidon laughed. “I thought you were just a kid! But look at you growing up so fast!” Polseidon was in his giant form. He had just finished sinking the rest of Eddsarch’s fleet. “Still, you got one ship, and I got seven! You’ve got a ways to go, kid. Gah ha ha!”

“Kh...” Loplanz grumbled. “F-Fine! I get it!” He beat his wings angrily as he shouted back.

“Next time some dragon girl comes around, you can show her your stuff, huh kid?” Polseidon said.

Loplantz’s face turned red. “Th-This isn’t about Wyne! Why would you even bring her up?!”

“Oh? All I said was ‘some dragon girl.’ You’ve really taken a liking to that Wyne girl from Mister Flio’s place, haven’t you, Loplanz? You’re growing up in more ways than one! Gah ha ha!”

“Ggghhh...” Loplanz had nothing to say to that. He gritted his beak as he glared at Polseidon from overhead.

J-Just watch me! Loplanz thought. I’m gonna become the best familiar there is! You’ll all see! And then... And then, Wyne will...

Wistfully, he stared off to the north, the direction where Houghtow City lay.

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

That night, Flio was taking a bath like usual. There were so many people living in his house that they had long ago split the bath off into

a men's and women's section. In addition, since they had moved here, Flio and Rys had had children, Ghozal, Uliminas, and Balirossa had gotten married, and Sleip and Byleri had started seeing each other, so there was a need to arrange things for families and couples to take a bath together if they wished. Therefore, they added one more bath for mixed bathing, bringing the total number to three.

There was a sign hanging on the doorway to one of the baths which read "Flio's Family." This meant that Flio, Rys, Wyne, Elinàsze, and Garyl were free to enter together. There was a tacit understanding that of the three baths, only two could be used for family bathing at one time. That way, the members of the household who were still single, like Blossom or Belano, would have a bath free to take whenever they wished.

Flio sighed. "It got late while I was away sending supplies to the Klyrode army..." he said. Suddenly, Flio heard the sound of little feet running towards him, going *pitter-patter, pitter-patter...* "Hm?"

"Dada!" Wyne said, casting the door open and leaping in, right next to Flio. "I wanna take a bath too!"

Flio smiled. "Thank you for your help today, Wyne," he said. "I hope I didn't keep you too late."

"I don't mind! Not if I'm helping you!" She flexed her small biceps—although it was her well-developed chest that stood out far more. Flio doted on Wyne every bit as much as his biological children, but seeing her breasts suddenly exposed like that caught him off guard. He looked away, doing his best to seem calm and composed.

Just then, the door opened, and Rys stepped in. "Oh?" she said. "I was wondering if my lord husband was in here. Wyne, you're here too?"

"Oh!" said Flio. "I hope we didn't wake you."

"Not at all. I was waiting for my lord husband to return. I see you got in the bath ahead of me..." She sat down to Flio's left side, opposite Wyne.

Wyne looked between the two, staring at their faces.

"What is it, Wyne?" Flio asked.

Wyne grinned happily. "I'm just so happy I get to live with my dada and mama!" she said. She circled around behind them and gave them both a big hug, rubbing her cheeks against theirs. "I'll look out for you, I promise! Dada and mama and Eli-Eli and Gare-Gare..."

Flio gave Wyne his usual easygoing smile. "I appreciate it, Wyne," he said. "But we're all together in this. You don't have to protect us."

But Wyne shook her head emphatically. "Uh-uh! I'll protect you! I wanna protect you!" she said, squeezing her foster parents tight. Flio and Rys returned her hug from either side, all three of them pressed close together.

“Wyne has been very energetic lately, hasn’t she?” Rys said. “Lately, she’s been coming along with me for my morning hunts as well.”

“She has?” Flio asked, slightly surprised to hear the news. Up until now, Wyne’s habit had been to sleep in until noon every day. It wasn’t that she was lazy, just that she was a dragon. Dragons are cold-blooded creatures, and have a certain amount of difficulty balancing their body temperature. Wyne, a dragonewt who had both humans and dragons in her ancestry, was a bit warmer than a full dragon, but still had trouble getting going until it was warm enough outside. When they had gone on their outing to the snowy mountains, she hadn’t been able to do anything until the afternoon.

“She used to sleep in every day, but lately she’s been getting up before dawn,” Rys said.

“Huh!” Flio said. “I wonder...” It seemed like he had some idea of what was happening.

“What is it, my lord husband?”

“Oh, it’s just...if Wyne’s getting up early all of a sudden...” As he spoke, Flio got out of bed and went to look in the children’s room. Recently, Wyne, Garyl, and Elinàsze had been sharing a single room. It used to be Wyne’s, but now it seemed like it belonged to all of them. Flio quietly opened the door and stepped inside.

There was a dresser full of clothing, and a three-level bunk bed, both of which Flio had made himself. Wyne was asleep on the lowest bunk. Elinàsze’s bed was the middle, and Garyl’s the top—but right now, all three of them were asleep cuddled together. Wyne was smiling as she slept, Garyl and Elinàsze’s arms wrapped around her.

“My!” Rys exclaimed when she saw, smiling fondly.

“And this,” Flio said, whispering in her ear, “is why Wyne has been getting up early all of a sudden.”

Rys nodded. When she had slept alone, Wyne had difficulty rising because of the temperature. But now she was sleeping with the twins on either side, helping her maintain her body heat and enabling her to get out of bed early in the morning.

Flio and Rys crept quietly up to the bed. The children looked so happy cuddled together like that. The loving parents got a good look at their kids’ smiling faces, and then turned to look at each other, nodded, and left them to sleep.

Wyne did a sleepy little yawn and pressed close to her bedmates, who held her tighter. They slept on, happy and at peace.

Afterword

Thank you so much for reading this book. We're already at the fourth entry in the series! This one was mostly new content, continuing the story from the first three volumes.

At last, Flio and Rys's children were born! This book was packed full of newly written content, from their introduction to the scene where they got their powers. Flio's first daughter is named Elinàsze now, unlike in the web novel where she was known as Elizabeth, and the new print edition version of Wyne got to be a good big sister.

Meanwhile Ghozal, Uliminas, Balirossa, and Byleri continue to enjoy the fruits of their youth—the heat of their love amid the cold snow. And Hero Gold-Hair gained two new traveling companions. They're still wandering around causing trouble by complete accident. In the next volume we're coming up to the developments that everyone remembers from the web novel! They were a little isolated from everything else happening this time around, but I hope you like what's in store for them next.

Finally, I would like to extend my thanks from the bottom of my heart to Katagiri-sama for the wonderful illustrations and to everyone at Overlap for everything related to publishing.

Miya Kinojo, January 2018



Chillin' in Another World
WITH LV 2
SUPER CHEAT POWERS
4

Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri



A normal day at Flio's house

At a restaurant

“Amazing!”

Name Valentine | 8

“Y-Yes,
Hero
Gooold-
Hair.”

“We need
another
job.”

Name Tsuya | 8

Name Hero Gold-Hair | 8

Bonus Short Stories

Just a Little Lonely

This story takes place the day after one of the episodes in this book.

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

Wyne’s room was on the second story of Flio’s house. But not long ago, the family had brought in a desk and dresser and other furniture for the twins Elinàsze and Garyl, converting her room into a shared room for all the children.

Wyne was not Flio and Rys’s child by birth, but she called Flio “dada” and Rys “mama” and admired them like they were her birth parents. Flio and Rys, too, doted on her every bit as much as on their biological children. And as you might expect, Wyne treated Elinàsze and Garyl as her precious younger siblings.

That day, all three children were fast asleep together as always in the same bed. They had a triple level bunk bed in their room, but they left the top two bunks empty to cuddle up together on the bottom, Elinàsze to Wyne’s right and Garyl to her left. They were mumbling, half-asleep, happy smiles on their faces.

“Zzz... Love you, Eli-Eli... Love you, Gare-Gare,” said Wyne.

“I love you too, Big Sis Wyne...” said Garyl.

“Me too...” said Elinàsze.

◇Downstairs, in the Living Room◇

Because there were so many people living in Flio’s house, the dining table on the first floor had to be absolutely enormous to accommodate them all. And by one end of the giant table, there was a large hutch. Inside, Sybe was sleeping soundly.

Sybe wasn’t in its usual unicorn rabbit form, but its original form as a psychobear, and was staring up at the hutch’s ceiling. It let out a lonely little “hrwuf.”

Before Elinàsze and Garyl were born, Wyne would often burst into Sybe’s hutch, crying “Sy-Sy! Let’s cuddle each other to sleep again!” But now, Wyne had stopped coming.

“Harruf.” Sybe sighed again.

Suddenly, Blossom stepped inside the hutch. “Heya.”

“Gwrf?” Sybe cocked its neck, looking puzzled at its guest.

“Hey now, don’t be like that,” Blossom said. “We used to sleep together all the time before Wyne showed up!” She crawled on top of Sybe’s fluffy belly and wrapped her arms around it, closing her eyes. “I’ve been just a little lonely, what with Wyne keeping you to herself like that! So I thought maybe I should start barging in on you again.”

It was very comfortable on top of Sybe, and before long, Blossom was fast asleep. Sybe looked up at the girl on top of it. “Gwor!” it cried happily, holding her close to itself and closing its eyes. As the two slept, they filled the room with snores.

Life at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store

Shion was a young man who spent his time working at a shop in Houghtow City and attending classes at the Houghtow College of Magic. Right now, he was in the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, working as a trial employee. The shop he had worked at recently shut its doors, and he had been looking for a new job. If he performed well, he would be hired as a regular member of the store’s staff. There were five other trial employees working in the Fli-o’-Rys General Store alongside Shion.

“We’ve got room to hire four of mew.” Uliminas, the chief accountant, stood in front of the six of them, smiling. “So let’s see how mew purrform today!”

“Yes, ma’am!” Shion and the other trial employees said, bowing.

I need money to pay the college’s tuition... Shion thought. I have to get this job no matter what! But I wonder why this place pays so well. It hasn’t been around that long...

Shion did as Uliminas instructed and went to the back of the shop. He was supposed to help Greanyl with her work managing the wagon teams. “But first I need to find Miss Greanyl...” He poked his head out the back door and looked all around. Behind the shop was a wagon-staging area, where Greanyl, the head of the supply team, was running around between the wagons, holding some kind of paper in her hand.

“E-Excuse me!” Shion said. “Are you Miss Greanyl?” But Greanyl was too fast. By the time he had spoken, she was already somewhere else. Shion stood still with a bewildered expression on his face, unsure how to get her attention. She didn’t stay in one place long enough for him to speak to her. “U-Um... E-Excuse— Huh?” he said. “Wait, no... There she is! No...here!”

Shion and a few others who had been sent here looked everywhere for Greanyl, but she was simply too fast. None of them were able to pin her down.

And then, suddenly, Greanyl came to a stop in front of the group.

“Who are you? Do you have business with me?” she asked.

“A-Ah!” Shion exclaimed, just a little panicked. “M-Miss Greanyl! Miss Uliminas asked us to come help you...”

“Help?” Greanyl asked, looking behind her. The wagons had already left, on their way to their destinations per Greanyl’s instructions.

Belatedly, Shion realized what had happened. “Huh? Don’t tell me we’re late...”

“It looks that way,” said one of the others. “Ha ha...”

“I guess we should apologize...”

The trial employees bowed apologetically, strained smiles on their faces.



“We’re finished here,” Greanyl had said. “Go help clean the storeroom.”

Following her instructions, Shion and the others ran downstairs to the storeroom in the basement. “Hopefully this time we can actually help...” Shion said.

“Yeah...”

“No kidding.”

They dashed down the stairs as fast as they could and opened the door to the storeroom. “E-Excuse me!” Shion said. “Miss Greanyl told us to come here to help with... Huh?” His eyes went wide. The crates and barrels were flying around the storeroom, seemingly by magic. In the middle of the room there was a person—feminine, slender, and wearing a cloth wrapped around their body for clothes. Behind their head shone a halo. It was Hiya.

“Oh?” Hiya said, perfectly unperturbed. “You would be the ones who came here looking for work, if I’m not mistaken?” They smiled sweetly. “I, Hiya, servant of the Exalted One, am more than capable of handling this on my own. Perhaps you can find someone else who needs assistance?” They kept on rearranging the contents of the storeroom as they spoke, deftly wielding their magic.

“O-Okay...” was all Shion could say.



Shion and the rest hurried back upstairs to the shop floor. There they saw Ghozal, carrying a veritable mountain of merchandise—at least ten wooden crates—as if they were weightless.

Shion stared agape. “It feels like they don’t even *need* part-time help,” he muttered. The other trial employees nodded in agreement.

The Stables

This story takes place the day after one of the episodes in this book.

◇Houghtow City—The Stables◇

In front of Flio's house was a vast pasture where Byleri tended to the horse-type magic beasts Flio and company brought back for her. Greanyl and the rest of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store supply team would borrow horses from here when they set out on a journey.

The horse beasts who had lived here since the stables were first set up were gathered around a corner. Each one of them was a fearsome magic beast with a splendid physique, dashing and strong. When Byleri brought them food, they would crowd around her, licking at her from all sides. Sometimes she would protest, saying, "N-No! Like, stop! Don't be naughty!" Her face would tinge red with indignation, but internally Byleri would be giggling at the attention.

But on this occasion, the horses were huddled together in a corner, bodies pressed close, when Byleri stepped inside the building, grinning broadly. "Hi hi!" she said. "Like, here's your breakfast!"

"You lot!" Dalc Horst bellowed. He was in his horse form as he led the former elite guard of the Infernal Sleip—all horses—to rank up in front of Byleri. "Attention! It's time for the morning ceremony! Let's pay the boss our respects!"

Dalc Horst looked around to make sure everyone was at attention, and saw the prior residents of the stables huddled together in their corners. "You over there!" he snapped. "The boss has come to bring us our food! Fall into rank!" In a great hurry, they rushed to join the others in front of Dalc Horst. Now satisfied that everyone was in place, Dalc Horst began the morning greetings. "Boss! Good morning!"

"Good morning!" the others echoed, all horses bowing their heads—the prior residents as well.

Since Sleip had quit the Dark Army and come to live at Flio's house, his loyal elite guard of twenty-one, led by Dalc Horst, had come to live at the stable as well. They had a great admiration for Sleip's new romantic partner Byleri as well, and had taken to calling her "boss."

If the prior resident horses ever dared to tease Byleri, Sleip's guard would appear behind them, menace in their eyes, saying, "Scoundrels! What are you doing to our boss?!" The old horses were all-powerful magic beasts, but the new ones were the elite of the elite, handpicked by the former Infernal Sleip himself. They were no match for them.

The prior residents ate the food Byleri had brought them, whispering to each other as they ate.

"I hope I can leave work soon..." one said.

“I know... I don’t feel comfortable here anymore...”

Byleri was doing her best, but it would be a while before the prior residents and Dalc Horst’s new gang came to get along well with each other.

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Volume 4
by Miya Kinojo

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